

# LEVITICUS

## Chapter 18

### *Unlawful Sexual Relations*

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. 3 You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. 4 You shall follow my rules[a] and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. 5 You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD. 6 “None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD. 7 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. 8 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness. 9 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether brought up in the family or in another home. 10 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness. 11 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, brought up in your father's family, since she is your sister. 12 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's relative. 13 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's relative. 14 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt. 15 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law; she is your son's wife, you shall not uncover her nakedness. 16 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness. 17 You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are relatives; it is depravity. 18 And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive. 19 “You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. 20 And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbor's wife and so make yourself unclean with her. 21 You shall not give any of your children to offer them[b] to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. 22 You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. 23 And you shall not lie with any animal and so make yourself unclean with it, neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it: it is perversion. 24 “Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, 25 and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. 26 But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you 27 (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), 28 lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. 29 For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people. 30 So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.”

**18:1–20:27** Here God's people are given instructions concerning interpersonal relations and a morality reflecting God's holiness. Israel was thereby prepared for a life different from the Canaanites, whose life-style was deplorably immoral. Ch. 18 contains prohibitions in the moral sphere, ch. 19 expands the Ten

Commandments to detail correct morality, and ch. 20 assesses the penalties for violating God's standard of morality. See chart on "Major Social Concerns in the Covenant". (CSB)

Sexual license and perversion ran rampant among the Egyptians and the Canaanites in ancient times. The children of Israel found it tempting to live like their neighbors. But time and again in chapter 18 the Lord warned His people not to be like them. They were instead to be characterized by sexual mores which gave evidence to their special covenant relationship with the Lord. (PBC)

Sexual sins were a temptation to Israel for other reasons as well. Several family units or a number of relatives (including unmarried in-laws) often lived close together. Unlawful sexual relations could indeed become a very special temptation because of the crowded living conditions. (PBC)

**18:1-5** God often used a personal identifier when addressing His people. In doing so, He reminded them of His covenant with them at Mount Sinai and showed that His personal interest was in their well-being. In this case, God connected their sexual relationships with His provision of land. Cf Gn 26:24; 35:11. Some provisions here bear similarity to the Code of Hammurabi (c 1728-1686 BC). (TLSB)

**18:2** In chs. 18–26 the phrase "I am the LORD" occurs 42 times. The Lord's name (i.e., his revealed character as Yahweh, "the LORD") is the authority that stands behind his instructions. See note on Ex 3:15. (CSB)

**18:3** Six times in this chapter Israel is warned not to follow the example of pagans (here, two times; see also vv. 24, 26–27, 30). (CSB)

*Egypt...land of Canaan* – In ancient Egypt the sin of incest was not uncommon. In the royal family in Egypt brothers and sisters married each other in order to keep the ruling power in the family. The Canaanites of the city of Sodom practiced homosexuality. (PBC)

Bestiality was practiced among both the Egyptians and Canaanites. Pharaoh Ramses II in fact claimed to be the offspring of the Egyptian god Ptah, who took the form of a goat. Inhabitants of the land of Canaan practiced child sacrifice. (PBC)

God detailed the sexual practices He abhors in order that the Israelites might live before Him in purity, unlike the Egyptians and Canaanites. Because of their sexual practices, Canaan, the land promised to the Israelites, is defiled, and their people will soon be "vomited out" of the land as God leads the Israelites in (v. 25). Basil the Great: "It appears that the legislator does not include every kind of sin, but particularly prohibits those of the Egyptians, from among who Israel had gone forth, and of the Canaanites among whom they were going" (NPNF2 8:213). (TLSB)

**18:4** *follow my rules* – This means the Lord is like a judge who has passed sentence which determines what may and what may not be done. (PBC)

*keep my statutes* – This means life is like a walk, a journey, and there is only one proper path to take. The word translated as "decrees" means God has set a boundary line over which no one may cross. (PBC)

**18:5** *walk*. With God's full blessing. The law was the way of life for the redeemed (see Eze 20:11, 13, 21), not a way of salvation for the lost (see Ro 10:5; Gal 3:12). (CSB)

The law was given to the people of Israel, not as a hurdle they had to clear if they wished to be saved, but an opportunity to show their love and gratitude to the Lord who had given them forgiveness and salvation. Keeping the law is the fruit of justification rather than the means of justification. (PBC)

God offers the promise of life, including vitality, prosperity, and blessings, if His decrees are kept (Dt. 30:15-20). (TLSB)

**18:6–23** Pointedly, God provides provisions for holiness in sexuality by addressing key issues of incest (vv 6–16), adultery (vv 17–18, 20), sacrificial idolatry (v 21), homosexuality (v 22), and bestiality (v 23). The Bible records Abraham’s intercourse with a servant (Gn 16:1–4), Lot’s incest (Gn 19:36), and Jacob’s marriage to his first cousins, who were also sisters (Gn 29), but it never promotes such relationships. God restates here that His original intent at creation was the ordered intimacy between one man and one woman. He makes plain that close intermarriage is now forbidden. (TLSB)

**18:6** A summary of the laws against incest (vv. 7–18). Penalties for incestuous relations are given in ch. 20. (CSB)

*uncover nakedness.* Euphemism for sexual relations; a command against nudity. cf Lv 20:17. A person’s nakedness involves personal honor, modesty, and sexual identity. (TLSB)

**18:7** This prohibition probably applied even after the father’s death. If the father was still living, the act was adulterous and therefore forbidden. (CSB)

**18:8** *your mother.* Other than your mother—assuming there is more than one wife. (CSB)

**18:9-18** But whom could an Israelite marry? God forbade marriage to non-Israelites. “Do not intermarry with them...for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods” (Dt. 7:3, 4). Marriage within a tribe was encouraged and marriage between cousins was allowed, but marriage with anyone closer than that was forbidden. In other words a man could not marry anyone to whom he related in the first or second degree. An example of first-degree relationship would be a mother or sister, of second degree relationship an aunt or granddaughter. (PBC)

Marriage made a girl not only a daughter-in-law, but a daughter of her husband’s parents. That was why Naomi said to daughter-in-law Ruth, “My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you...?” (Ruth 3:1) (PBC)

**18:10** *your son’s daughter* – Incest degrades and often destroys those who participate in it, even entire families. (TLSB)

**18:11** *sister.* There would be many half-sisters in a polygamous society. Tamar claimed that an exception to this prohibition could be made (2Sa 13:12–13; but see note there). (CSB)

**18:14** *your mother’s sister.* If the father’s brother was alive, the act would be adulterous. If he was dead, one could rationalize such a marriage because the aunt was not a blood relative—but it was forbidden. (CSB)

**18:15** Cf. the account of Judah and Tamar (Ge 38:18). (CSB)

**18:16** *your brother’s wife.* The law also applied to a time after divorce or the brother’s death. To marry one’s brother’s widow was not immoral but might damage the brother’s inheritance. The levirate law of

Dt 25:5–6 offered an exception that preserved the dead brother’s inheritance and continued his line. (CSB)

**18:17** *daughter*. Stepdaughter (granddaughter-in-law is also covered in the verse). The law applied even after the mother’s death. (CSB)

*it is depravity*. This is the technical term in ritual legislation used to describe a deliberate act of sexual misconduct such as rape, prostitution (19:29; cf. Ezk 16:26-27), and incest (Lv. 20:14). (TLSB)

**18:18** Cf. the account of Jacob with Leah and Rachel (Ge 29:23–30). (CSB)

*rival wife* – Marriage to sister-in-law was permitted only after the death of her sister. (TLSB)

God’s law did not allow for bigamy or polygamy in spite of the many examples of that among the patriarchs and other heroes of faith. (PBC)

**18:20** *unclean with her*. This legislation may be addressing the consensual act of intercourse to impregnate the wife of an infertile man. (TLSB)

**18:21** *Molech*. The god of the Ammonites. The detestable practice of sacrificing children to Molech was common in Phoenicia and other surrounding countries. Cf. 1Ki 3:26–27. King Manasseh evidently sacrificed his sons to Molech (2Ch 33:6; see 2Ki 23:10). Jer 32:35 protests the practice. (CSB)

In pagan cultures, children were offered to gods such as Molech, an Ammonite god (2Ki 16:3). These children were slaughtered or perhaps incinerated (Ezk 16:21). Such acts desecrate God’s holy name. (TLSB)

**18:22** *lie with a male*. See 20:13, where the penalty for homosexual acts is death. (CSB)

Sexual intercourse was ordained by God for procreation (cf Gn 1:28) and must involve husband and wife, the “male and female” in Gn 1:27. (TLSB)

**18:23** *perversion*. Disruption in the divinely established order by the union of what should be kept apart. Bestiality, or the sexual union of a human being and an animal, is perverted behavior. (TLSB)

**18:24** *I am driving out*. Sexual purity commanded by God had implications for all nations. Because of the sexual practices of the Canaanites, God used the Israelites to drive them from their land. (TLSB)

**18:25** *the land vomited out its inhabitants*. God in His purity looked upon the displacement of the Canaanites as accomplished fact. The correlation between the ugliness of sin and the “vomit[ing] out” restated divine intervention as God called people to account for their deeds and let them suffer the consequences of their sin. (TLSB)

**18:27** God warns that those now inhabiting Canaan polluted the land by their sin. He commissions Israel to protect His land from sexual pollution. (TLSB)

**18:28** *lest the land vomit you out*. The Israelites were given possession of the land on a conditional basis. They must remain sexually pure and follow God’s tenets or be subjected to the same consequences as the Canaanites before them. Cf Dt 28. (TLSB)

**18:30** *I am the LORD your God*. God’s name here and in v 2 reminds His people from whom these ordinances come. (TLSB)

**Ch 18** Sexual purity is so important to God that He issued decrees detailing how to protect it. Only intercourse between a husband and wife is approved by God. God speaks against sexual sins among Christians as well (Eph 5:5–6; Heb 13:4). The Gospel sets people free from sin, but that freedom is not an excuse for committing sin. God knows our hearts and provides marriage to protect us from sin (1Co 7:2). In faithfulness to His Church, He hallows us and provides for our forgiveness from all sins. • Lord of the Church, forgive me and protect my heart from all impurity. Keep me from sexual sin by the power of Your Holy Spirit. Amen. (TLSB)