

Session 3

LGBTQ+ & THE BIBLE



Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13—The Purity Laws



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LGBTQ+ AND THE BIBLE

Session 3: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 — The Purity Laws

Understanding the Holiness Code, Ancient Culture, and Freedom in Christ

Primary Scriptures: Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; Romans 7:4–6

Additional Scriptures for Study: Leviticus 17–26; Exodus 8:26; Genesis 46:34; Deuteronomy 14; Deuteronomy 22:5; Deuteronomy 25:13–16; Ezekiel 18:5–13; Acts 15:1–29; Galatians 5:1–25

INTRODUCTION: READING LEVITICUS IN ITS PROPER CONTEXT

Among the biblical passages most frequently used to condemn homosexuality, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are often considered the most direct. Unlike the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, these verses contain explicit prohibitions concerning sexual activity between males. They also use language that many English translations render as *detestable* or *abomination*.

For many Christians, that seems to settle the matter. The verses appear straightforward, and the language is strong. Consequently, they are often quoted without considering the surrounding laws, the culture in which they were written, or the relationship between the Law of Moses and Christian life under the New Covenant.

But as we established in Session 1, responsible biblical interpretation requires us to understand the original language, historical setting, and intended audience of a passage. We must also consider where the passage belongs within the larger biblical story.

Leviticus was not written to a modern Christian congregation discussing sexual orientation and committed same-sex relationships. It was given to ancient Israel as part of a covenant that governed the nation's religious practices, social relationships, moral responsibilities, and distinctive identity.

That does not mean Leviticus is unimportant to Christians. It remains part of inspired Scripture and reveals much about Israel's understanding of holiness, worship, and life before God. However, understanding its authority requires us to consider how the New Testament describes the Christian's relationship to the Mosaic Law.

This session will examine the two passages themselves, the cultural assumptions surrounding them, the meaning of the Hebrew word often translated *abomination*, and the wider Holiness Code in which they appear. We will then consider what the New Testament teaches about living under grace and following the Holy Spirit.

1. WHAT DO THE PASSAGES ACTUALLY SAY?

Read Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13

Leviticus 18:22 prohibits a male from lying with another male in the manner associated with sexual intercourse with a woman. Leviticus 20:13 repeats the prohibition and attaches a severe penalty within Israel's ancient legal system.

These are explicit prohibitions concerning male same-sex sexual activity. We do not need to deny that fact in order to examine what the passages meant within their original setting.

However, there are several important observations that should shape our interpretation.

First, the passages address a particular sexual act rather than the modern concept of sexual orientation. They do not describe an enduring pattern of romantic attraction, a person's sexual identity, or a committed relationship between two people of the same sex.

Second, the prohibitions are specifically male-focused. Neither passage contains a corresponding prohibition addressing sexual activity between women.

Third, the verses belong to a larger collection of laws governing Israel's covenant life. They cannot be properly interpreted without considering that legal and cultural context.

The question is therefore not whether Leviticus contains a prohibition concerning sexual activity between males. It clearly does. The question is what that prohibition meant within ancient Israel and how Christians should understand it in light of the New Covenant.

2. WHY IS FEMALE SAME-SEX BEHAVIOR ABSENT?

One of the most striking features of these passages is what they do not address. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 speak specifically about males, but they contain no equivalent prohibition concerning sexual activity between females.

This absence deserves attention because the passages are frequently presented as though they were comprehensive statements about homosexuality in the modern sense.

Today, homosexuality is generally understood as a sexual orientation that may be experienced by men or women. If we read these verses as though they were written to address that modern category, their exclusive focus on males becomes difficult to explain.

The ancient world, however, did not organize its understanding of sexuality around the same categories we use today. Sexual conduct was often understood within broader assumptions about gender, family authority, reproduction, social hierarchy, and the roles assigned to men and women.

In many ancient Near Eastern societies, men held legal and social authority over women. Women frequently occupied subordinate positions within family structures, inheritance arrangements, and public life.

These assumptions shaped the way sexual behavior was understood and regulated. The distinction between male and female was not merely biological; it was also connected to expectations about power, authority, and social status.

That cultural background helps explain why male same-sex intercourse could carry particular social significance within an ancient patriarchal society.

3. GENDER AND SOCIAL STATUS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

To understand the cultural assumptions behind these laws, we need to recognize that ancient Near Eastern societies were generally organized around male authority.

Men were expected to exercise leadership within the household and occupy positions of social dominance. Women ordinarily held a lower social and legal status, and their lives were frequently regulated through relationships with fathers, husbands, and other male relatives.

Within that framework, sexual roles could be associated with social hierarchy. The person occupying the active or dominant role was understood differently from the person placed in the receptive or subordinate position.

For a man to be treated sexually in a manner associated with the female role could therefore be viewed as a violation of established expectations concerning masculinity and social status.

This helps explain why male same-sex intercourse could be understood as more than a question of sexual behavior. It could also challenge the gender hierarchy upon which the surrounding culture depended.

The wording of Leviticus, which compares the prohibited act to lying with a woman, must be considered against this background.

Recognizing these cultural assumptions does not establish every reason the prohibition was given. It does, however, demonstrate why we should not assume that an ancient law concerning male sexual conduct was addressing the same questions Christians ask today about sexual orientation and loving same-sex relationships.

The cultural world of Leviticus was profoundly different from our own, and those differences matter when interpreting the text.

4. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORD “ABOMINATION”

Both passages use a Hebrew word frequently translated as *abomination* or *detestable*.

The word is תועבה (*to'evah*), sometimes transliterated *toevah*.

For modern English readers, the word *abomination* often communicates something uniquely horrifying or inherently evil. When Christians encounter it in Leviticus, they may assume that it identifies an offense so universally offensive to God that no further historical or theological examination is necessary.

But Hebrew words must be understood through their actual usage rather than through the emotional force of a particular English translation.

To'evah is used throughout the Old Testament for a variety of practices regarded as detestable, forbidden, or religiously unacceptable. These include idolatry, dishonest business practices, prohibited sexual conduct, and behavior associated with other religious cultures.

The term can describe serious moral wrongdoing, but it can also appear in contexts involving cultural or religious distinctions.

Its meaning therefore depends upon the circumstances in which it is used.

The presence of the word *to'evah* tells us that the practice being described was regarded as forbidden or detestable within the relevant biblical setting. It does not, by itself, explain how that prohibition relates to Christian life under the New Covenant.

5. WHAT IS DETESTABLE IN ONE CULTURE MAY BE ACCEPTABLE IN ANOTHER

Read Genesis 46:34 and Exodus 8:26

The Old Testament provides useful examples of how the language of *to'evah* can function within different cultural and religious settings.

Genesis 46:34 describes shepherds as detestable to the Egyptians. The statement reflects an Egyptian cultural attitude toward a particular occupation. It does not establish that shepherding is inherently sinful before God.

Indeed, some of the most important figures in the biblical story were shepherds. Abraham, Moses, and David all had connections to shepherding, and Scripture repeatedly uses shepherding as a positive image of leadership and care.

Exodus 8:26 provides another example. When Pharaoh offers to allow the Israelites to make sacrifices within Egypt, Moses explains that their sacrifices would be objectionable to the Egyptians.

The problem concerns the religious significance of the animals involved and the conflict between Israelite worship and Egyptian religious customs.

In these examples, the language of detestability reflects cultural and religious judgments that cannot simply be transferred into universal moral conclusions.

This does not mean that every occurrence of *to'evah* refers only to a cultural taboo. The word is also used for practices Scripture condemns on moral grounds.

It does mean that we must examine the particular context rather than assuming that the English word *abomination* always carries exactly the same meaning.

6. THE MANY USES OF *TO'EVAH* IN SCRIPTURE

The Hebrew word *to'evah* appears in passages addressing a wide variety of practices.

It is used in connection with idolatry and the worship of other gods, including practices condemned in Deuteronomy and Isaiah. It appears in discussions of prohibited sexual behavior and marriage arrangements, as well as religious practices associated with pagan worship.

The term is also used in connection with cross-dressing in Deuteronomy 22:5 and dishonest commercial practices such as using inaccurate weights and measures in Deuteronomy 25.

Proverbs uses the language of detestability when discussing dishonesty and other forms of wicked conduct. Ezekiel employs similar language while condemning oppression, exploitation, and the mistreatment of the poor and needy.

This range of usage is important because it prevents us from treating *to'evah* as though it were a technical term referring exclusively to sexual sin.

The word does not identify one unique category of wrongdoing. It describes practices regarded as seriously objectionable within particular biblical contexts.

Some of those practices involve worship, some involve social justice, some involve sexual conduct, and others concern the distinctive religious and cultural obligations of Israel.

Consequently, when we encounter the word in Leviticus 18 and 20, we must examine the larger covenant framework in which the prohibition appears.

7. UNDERSTANDING THE HOLINESS CODE

Leviticus 18 and 20 belong to a larger section of the book commonly known as the **Holiness Code**, generally associated with Leviticus 17–26.

These chapters contain instructions intended to shape Israel's life as a people set apart for God.

The laws address a broad range of subjects, including worship, sacrifices, sexual conduct, priestly responsibilities, agricultural practices, religious festivals, economic relationships, and the treatment of vulnerable members of society.

They were not written as an isolated collection of rules about sexuality. They formed part of a comprehensive covenant system governing the life of ancient Israel.

A central purpose of these laws was to distinguish Israel from the surrounding nations and their religious practices.

Israel was called to be holy, meaning set apart for God. This distinctiveness was expressed through moral responsibilities, religious observances, social practices, and ritual requirements.

The surrounding cultures of Canaan and other ancient Near Eastern societies provided the background against which many of these distinctions were established.

Understanding the Holiness Code therefore requires us to recognize that its instructions served a particular people within a particular covenant relationship.

8. THE HOLINESS CODE CONTAINS MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF LAWS

When Christians quote Leviticus 18:22 or 20:13, they frequently isolate those verses from the surrounding chapters.

But the Holiness Code contains many requirements that most Christians do not observe today.

Leviticus 17 includes regulations concerning the consumption of animals that died naturally. Leviticus 19 contains instructions regarding offerings and the treatment of an enslaved woman who was pledged to another man.

Leviticus 21 regulates the conduct of priests and places restrictions upon priestly service for men with certain physical conditions. Leviticus 23 establishes religious festivals and observances, including Passover, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Booths.

Leviticus 24 addresses offerings and the maintenance of bread and oil associated with worship. Leviticus 25 contains regulations concerning property, debt, servitude, redemption, and the Year of Jubilee.

These instructions governed many aspects of Israel's national and religious life.

Most Christians do not observe the priestly regulations, sacrificial requirements, agricultural provisions, or festival obligations in the same manner as ancient Israel.

This raises an essential interpretive question: **If Christians do not regard the Holiness Code as a binding covenant system, on what basis are individual provisions selected for direct application today?**

That question must be answered through a careful understanding of the New Testament rather than through selective quotation.

9. WHY CHRISTIANS DO NOT FOLLOW THE ENTIRE HOLINESS CODE

Christianity emerged from within Judaism, and the earliest followers of Jesus were themselves Jewish.

As the gospel spread beyond Israel, however, the Church faced an important question: Were Gentile believers required to adopt the laws and practices of the Mosaic covenant in order to become full members of God's people?

The New Testament records considerable discussion about this issue.

The early Church ultimately recognized that Gentile Christians were not required to enter the Mosaic covenant as though becoming Jewish were a prerequisite for following Jesus.

This decision reflected a fundamental understanding of what Christ had accomplished.

The Christian relationship with God is established through Jesus Christ and the New Covenant rather than through participation in the complete legal system given to ancient Israel.

That does not mean the Old Testament has no continuing authority or that its moral teachings are irrelevant. Christians continue to learn from the Law and the Prophets, and the New Testament repeatedly calls believers to lives of holiness and righteousness.

However, the authority of the Mosaic Law must be understood through the work of Christ and the teaching of the New Testament.

Christians cannot simply assume that every command given to ancient Israel applies directly to the Church in precisely the same way.

10. THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE LAW OF MOSES

Read Romans 7:4–6

Paul addresses the Christian's relationship to the Law in Romans 7.

He explains that believers have died to the Law through their union with Christ and now belong to the One who has been raised from the dead.

Paul's argument is not that God's people should abandon righteousness. Rather, he teaches that the basis of their relationship with God has changed.

Christians are no longer bound to the Mosaic Law as the covenant system through which they relate to God. Through Christ, they have entered a new relationship characterized by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul describes this as serving God in the new way of the Spirit rather than through the old written code.

This distinction is essential for understanding the Christian life.

Under the New Covenant, obedience is not reduced to the external enforcement of Israel's legal requirements. Christian holiness grows from union with Christ and the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit.

The believer is called to live in righteousness, but the foundation and character of that life are understood through Jesus rather than through direct submission to the entire Mosaic covenant.

11. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE RELEASED FROM THE LAW?

Paul's teaching in Romans 7 can be misunderstood if we assume that freedom from the Law means freedom from moral responsibility.

That is not what Paul teaches.

The Christian's release from the Mosaic covenant does not create permission to live selfishly, exploit others, or disregard God's will.

Instead, Paul explains that believers now serve God through the Spirit.

The distinction is between two ways of relating to God: one governed by the covenant code given to ancient Israel and the other established through Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit does not lead believers away from the character of God. The Spirit produces lives marked by righteousness, love, faithfulness, and holiness.

This is why Paul can teach that Christians are no longer under the Law while continuing to call them to a transformed moral life.

The New Covenant does not eliminate the call to holiness. It changes the relationship through which holiness is understood and lived.

That distinction must guide our interpretation of Old Testament laws, including those found in Leviticus.

12. THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

Read Galatians 5:1–25

The Christian life is not simply a matter of replacing one collection of religious regulations with another.

Through Christ, believers are called into a living relationship with God in which the Holy Spirit guides, convicts, teaches, and transforms them.

Paul's discussion in Galatians emphasizes both freedom and responsibility.

Christian freedom is not an opportunity to indulge selfish desires. It is an invitation to live under the direction of the Spirit and to express faith through love.

The fruit of the Spirit provides an important description of the character that should emerge from this life. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are evidence of the Spirit's transforming work.

These qualities are not limited to one category of Christians. They describe the character expected of everyone who follows Jesus.

The question of Christian holiness must therefore be considered within this Spirit-led framework.

Rather than assuming that faithful discipleship consists of selectively enforcing provisions of the Holiness Code, we are called to understand how Christ and the Spirit shape the believer's life under the New Covenant.

13. GRACE IS NOT PERMISSION TO SIN

One concern sometimes raised when Christians discuss freedom from the Mosaic Law is that grace might become an excuse for moral compromise.

Paul directly rejects that misunderstanding.

Freedom in Christ does not mean that whatever a person desires must automatically be acceptable. The Christian life continues to involve repentance, self-examination, spiritual growth, and obedience to God.

However, the New Testament does not define that obedience simply as conformity to every requirement of the Mosaic covenant.

Instead, believers are called to follow Jesus and live under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This is a significant difference.

The Christian's moral responsibility is not eliminated, but it is understood through the New Covenant rather than through the direct application of Israel's ancient legal system.

That means we must be careful when using individual Old Testament laws to make judgments about other people.

Before applying a particular provision, we need to consider its original purpose, covenant setting, and relationship to the teaching of Christ and the apostles.

14. THE PROBLEM OF SELECTIVE APPLICATION

One of the difficulties in using Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as direct condemnations of contemporary same-sex relationships is that Christians generally do not apply the surrounding laws in the same way.

Most Christians do not observe the complete system of ritual purity, priestly restrictions, religious festivals, sacrifices, and social regulations established in Leviticus.

They recognize that these requirements belonged to Israel's covenant life and that the coming of Christ changed the believer's relationship to that covenant.

Yet the two verses concerning male same-sex intercourse are sometimes removed from this context and treated as though they operate independently of the rest of the Holiness Code.

This creates an inconsistency that requires explanation.

If the Mosaic Law is no longer binding upon Christians as a covenant system, then we cannot simply assume that one provision remains directly applicable because it addresses a subject we consider important.

We must examine how the New Testament understands the Law and how the particular issue is addressed within the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

This is not an attempt to avoid Scripture. It is an effort to apply the same interpretive principles consistently.

Faithful biblical interpretation does not permit us to ignore the covenant context of a passage when that context complicates an interpretation we have inherited.

15. LEVITICUS AND MODERN SEXUAL ORIENTATION

As we established in Session 1, the biblical writers did not possess the modern framework of sexual orientation.

The prohibitions in Leviticus concern male sexual conduct within ancient Israel's covenant and cultural setting. They do not discuss the enduring romantic attraction experienced by gay or lesbian people, nor do they describe the modern understanding of a committed same-sex relationship.

This distinction does not make the ancient text meaningless. It helps us identify what the text actually addresses.

The absence of any corresponding prohibition concerning female same-sex behavior also reminds us that the passage was not written as a comprehensive discussion of homosexuality in the modern sense.

The cultural assumptions surrounding masculinity, gender hierarchy, and social status further distinguish the ancient setting from contemporary conversations about mutual relationships between consenting adults.

When these passages are quoted as though they provide a direct and complete biblical judgment on every gay or lesbian person, important historical and linguistic distinctions are lost.

We must be careful not to make the text answer questions that its original authors were not addressing in the terms we use today.

16. WHAT CAN CHRISTIANS LEARN FROM LEVITICUS?

Recognizing that Christians are no longer under the Mosaic Law as a covenant system does not mean that Leviticus has nothing to teach us.

The Holiness Code reflects Israel's calling to belong to God and live differently from the surrounding nations.

Its laws reveal the importance of worship, community responsibility, justice, and the conviction that belonging to God should shape everyday conduct.

Those themes remain meaningful for Christians, even though the specific covenant requirements are not applied in the same way.

The New Testament continues to call believers to holiness, but it locates that holiness within their relationship with Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, the proper Christian response to Leviticus is not to discard it, nor is it to enforce its provisions selectively.

We should study it as part of the larger biblical story, understand its role within Israel's covenant, and interpret its continuing significance through the New Covenant.

This approach honors Scripture by recognizing both its original purpose and its place within the unfolding work of God.

17. FREEDOM TO FOLLOW THE SPIRIT

The central message of the New Testament concerning the Mosaic Law is that believers have been brought into a new relationship with God through Christ.

Romans 7:4–6 describes this change as release from the old written code so that believers may serve God in the new way of the Spirit.

This freedom is not freedom to disregard God. It is freedom to hear and follow the Holy Spirit rather than attempting to establish righteousness through the covenant regulations given to ancient Israel.

For Christians examining the Levitical passages concerning male same-sex intercourse, this is an essential distinction.

We cannot understand the meaning of those passages merely by reading two verses in isolation. We must consider the patriarchal culture in which they were written, the language used to describe the prohibited conduct, the larger Holiness Code to which they belong, and the New Testament's teaching about the believer's relationship to the Law.

Only then can we approach the passages with the care and seriousness Scripture deserves.

The Christian life is not governed by selective enforcement of ancient purity regulations. It is a life of faith in Jesus Christ, transformed and directed by the Holy Spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Before this study, how did you understand Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13?
2. Why is it important to recognize that these passages specifically address male sexual conduct rather than modern sexual orientation?
3. What significance do you see in the absence of a corresponding prohibition concerning female same-sex behavior?
4. How did ancient Near Eastern assumptions about masculinity, gender, and social status differ from contemporary understandings?
5. Why might sexual roles have carried particular social significance in a patriarchal culture?
6. What does the Hebrew word *to'evah* mean, and why is its range of usage important?
7. How do Genesis 46:34 and Exodus 8:26 demonstrate that something considered detestable within one culture may not be inherently sinful?
8. What other practices are described with the language of *to'evah* in the Old Testament?
9. Why should we avoid assuming that the English word *abomination* always communicates exactly the same meaning in every biblical passage?

10. What was the purpose of the Holiness Code within ancient Israel?
11. Why is it important to read Leviticus 18 and 20 within the larger collection of laws found in Leviticus 17–26?
12. Which requirements of the Holiness Code do most Christians no longer observe today?
13. Why do Christians generally understand the Mosaic Law differently from the way ancient Israel understood it?
14. What problem arises when individual laws are selected for enforcement without considering their covenant context?
15. What does Romans 7:4–6 teach about the believer's relationship to the Law through Christ?
16. What does Paul mean when he describes serving God in the new way of the Spirit?
17. Why does freedom from the Mosaic Law not mean freedom from moral responsibility?
18. How does Galatians 5 describe the character of a life directed by the Holy Spirit?
19. What is the difference between following the Spirit and simply doing whatever we desire?
20. How does the New Covenant change the way Christians should approach Old Testament purity regulations?
21. Why is it important to distinguish an ancient prohibition concerning male sexual behavior from the modern understanding of a loving same-sex relationship?
22. How can Christians take Leviticus seriously without treating every provision of the Holiness Code as directly binding today?
23. What have you learned in this session that challenges assumptions you previously held about these passages?
24. How might this understanding help you respond when someone quotes Leviticus as a straightforward condemnation of homosexuality?
25. What does it mean in practical terms to pursue holiness through a living relationship with Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

KEY TAKEAWAY

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 contain explicit prohibitions concerning sexual activity between males. However, these passages were written within the historical, cultural, and covenant setting of ancient Israel. They do not address sexual orientation as understood today, and they contain no corresponding prohibition concerning female same-sex behavior.

The cultural assumptions of the ancient Near East are important to understanding these laws. Men and women occupied different positions within a patriarchal social structure, and sexual roles could carry implications concerning masculinity, authority, and social status.

The Hebrew word *to'evah*, often translated *abomination* or *detestable*, appears throughout the Old Testament in connection with a wide range of practices. Some concern moral wrongdoing, while others reflect religious and cultural distinctions. Its meaning must therefore be understood within the particular context in which it appears.

The Levitical prohibitions also belong to the larger Holiness Code, which governed Israel's religious, social, and moral life under the Mosaic covenant. That code includes numerous regulations concerning sacrifices, priesthood, festivals, food, property, and community obligations that Christians do not ordinarily regard as directly binding today.

The New Testament teaches that believers have entered a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Romans 7:4–6 explains that Christians have been released from the Law as a covenant system and are now called to serve God in the new way of the Spirit.

This freedom does not eliminate holiness or moral responsibility. It establishes a new basis for Christian discipleship through Christ and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

The central lesson is that Christians cannot responsibly use isolated provisions of the Holiness Code to condemn modern same-sex relationships without first considering the original cultural setting, the covenant to which those laws belonged, and the New Testament's teaching about freedom in Christ.

The Christian life is not freedom to commit sin. It is freedom to hear and follow the voice of the Holy Spirit.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of holiness and grace, thank You for giving us Your Word and for revealing Yourself through the history of Your people. Help us understand Scripture within the languages, cultures, and covenant relationships in which it was written, and give us the humility to examine interpretations we may have accepted without question.

As we study the laws given to ancient Israel, teach us to recognize their place within Your unfolding work of redemption. Help us understand the difference between the covenant established through Moses and the new life You have given us through Jesus Christ.

Thank You that through Christ we have been brought into a living relationship with You. Remind us that freedom from the Law is not permission to live selfishly or disregard Your will, but an invitation to walk in the freedom and holiness made possible by Your Spirit.

Guard us against using isolated passages of Scripture to condemn others without understanding their meaning and context. Give us wisdom to distinguish between ancient cultural assumptions and the enduring call to live faithfully before You.

Teach us to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit and respond with willing hearts. May our lives increasingly reflect love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

As we continue this study, deepen our understanding of Your Word and strengthen our commitment to following Jesus with integrity, humility, and grace.

In Jesus' name, Amen.