

בין קדש לחל

אבנר רמו



In the Book of Leviticus we are told that Aaron and his sons are told that among their duties are:
ולהבדיל בין הקדש ובין החל, ובין הטמא ובין הטהור.
ולהורת את-בני ישראל-את כל-החקים אשר דבר יהוה אליהם ביז-משה.

“And [that you] put difference between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean;

And that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which *YHWH* had spoken to them by the hand of Moses” (Lev 10:10-11).

While each of the Hebrew words: קדש - “holy”; טמא - “unclean”; and טהור - “clean” appear in the Bible hundreds of times, there are only few verses that contain the word: חל (*khol*). In addition, while the bible clearly indicates which subjects are “holy”, “unclean” or “clean”, this is not so with the word חל (*khol*).

The comparison between the middle part of this verse and its last part suggests that the word חל (*khol*) is the opposite of “holy” rather than “common.” Yet, this verse does not specify in which areas the distinction between the holy and the unholy should be made.

In the Book of Ezekiel we read

כהניה חמסו תורתי ויחללו קדשי-בין-קדש לחל לא הבדילו, ובין-הטמא לטהור לא הודיעו;
ומשבתותי העלימו עיניהם, ואחל בתוכם.

“Her priests have done violence to My law, and have profaned My holy things; they have put no difference between the holy and the common, neither have they taught difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have hidden their eyes from My sabbaths, and I am profaned in their midst” (Eze 22:26; see also: Eze 44:23).

The understanding of the word **ואחל** as “**and I am profaned**” by the Greek (and the English) translators suggests that they assumed that this word is a letter-deletion error of **ואחלל**. However, it is also possible that the word **ואחל** means: “and I became unholy.”

Twenty chapters later we read about the future House of God:

לארבע רוחות מדדו, חומה לו סביב סביב-ארך חמש מאות, ורחב חמש מאות: להבדיל בין הקדש לחל.

“**They measured to the four sides; it had a wall round about, the length five hundred, and the breadth five hundred, to make a separation between that which was holy and that which was common**” (Eze 42:20; see also: Eze 48:15).

Here, we are told that an area of five hundred (cubit?) by five hundred (cubits?) around God’s house, is a holy area, and it is distinctly separated (in this case by a wall) from the outer area which is defined as **חל** (*khol*) - “unholy.”

We read in the Book of Samuel:

ויען הכהן את-דוד ויאמר, אין-לחם חל אל-תחת ידי: כי-אם-לחם קדש יש,

“**And the priest answered David, and said: There is no common bread under my hand, but there is holy bread**” (1 Sam 21:5).

Yet two verses later we find:

ויתן-לו הכהן [] קדש: כי לא-היה שם לחם [], כי-אם-לחם הפנים המוסרים מלפני יהוה, לשום לחם חם, ביום הלקחו.

“**And the priest gave him holy [bread]; for there was no [] bread there but the showbread, that was taken from before YHWH, to put hot bread in the day when it was taken away**” (1 Sam 21:7).

However, the comparison between these verses and the understanding of the Greek (and the English) translators suggest that that the priest indeed gave David the **לחם קדש** - “**holy bread**”, but in verse 1 Sam 21:7 the word **לחם** - “**bread**” is missing.

In addition, as the syntax of: **אין-לחם חל אל-תחת ידי: כי-אם-לחם קדש יש** is corrupt, we may assume that the marked words are superfluous. Here the word **חל** (*khol*) could be a corrupt version of **לחם** (*lekhem*), and it appears that the correct word was already inserted near it by a late scribe. Alternatively, the reading of the last part of verse 1 Sam 21:7 suggest that **לחם חל** is a letter-substitution error of **לחם חם** - “**hot bread**.”

Verse 1 Sam 21:5 ends with the words: **אם-נשמרו הנערים אך מאשה** - “**if [only] the young men have kept themselves from women**” (1 Sam 21:5). The Greek translator wrote here: “if the lads have kept themselves from a woman, then they shall it.” The “addition” inserted by the Greek translator indicates that he believed that the priest agreed to give the “holy bread” for the lads only if David could assure him that the lads had kept themselves from “a woman.”

David answered the priest as follows:

ויען דוד את-הכהן ויאמר לו, כי אם-אשה עצרה- לנו כתמול שלשם בצאתי, ויהיו כלי-הנערים קדש: והוא דרך חל-ואף כי היום יקדש בכלי.

“And David answered the priest, and said to him: If a truth women have been kept from us about these three days; when I came out, the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was but a common journey; how much more then to-day, when there shall be holy [bread] in [their] vessel?” (1 Sam 21:6).

The Greeks translated this verse as follows:

“And David answered the priest and said to him: Indeed, we have kept ourselves from a woman, yesterday and the third day, when I go on a journey all the lads became consecrated, and their journey is non-sanctified, wherefore it shall be consecrated today through my implements.”

It seems that the syntax of verse 1 Sam 21:6 is so corrupt that its understanding by the Greek and English translators varies considerably, and they “corrected” the Hebrew words in completely different ways. For example: the Hebrew **והוא דרך חל** was translated to Greek as: “and their journey is non-sanctified”, while it appears in the English translation as: “**though it was but a common journey.**” Yet none of these translations is certain or helps us understand this verse. We therefore have to accept that the meaning of the unique term **דרך חל**, (even if is genuine) avoided us.

We may conclude that the biblical **להבדיל בין הקדש ובין החל** - “**to put difference between the holy and the unholy**” is relevant only in regard to the separation between a defined area around God’s house and the land beyond it. It appears that one of the tasks of the Levites is to guard this separation.