

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Leviticus

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Encamped in the shadow of Mount Sinai, the Israelites had experienced the great redemptive act of Yahweh – the deliverance from Egyptian bondage – that would remain central in their faith for all generations. They had seen and heard the thunders and lightnings on the holy mountain (Exodus 19:16-19), and Yahweh had given his commandments (20:1-17). He had declared that he was their God and they were his people.

But how was this relationship to be maintained? The Israelites could not dwell forever at Mt. Sinai. They were to settle in a land where they could experience the benefits of being his people. Moreover, they were to become, in some way not yet spelled out, the source of blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:3), communicating their faith to other peoples. The wilderness of Sinai was the place for neither. Canaan was to be the land of the promise.

As the book of Numbers tells us, an entire generation of Israelites was to pass away before the people entered the land. During this period, they would learn through experience the results of both obeying and disobeying the word of the Lord. Prior to their entrance into Palestine, where they would be confronted by Canaanite cultic practices, they were also to learn the proper ways to worship Yahweh. The details of this worship are given in Leviticus.

Name and Contents

Name. Since ancient books actually were identified by their opening words, the title of the Hebrew book accordingly is “and he called” (Lev. 1:1). “Leviticus” comes from the Greek LXX through the Latin Vulgate. Basically it is an adjective, suggesting the complete title “the levitical (book)” or “the book pertaining to the Levites.” The principal figure in Leviticus is Aaron, and the priesthood which is described in the book, is limited to his sons. Aaron, of course (like his brother Moses), was a Levite. However, a distinction was made between the “Aaronic priesthood” – descended from Levi (one of Jacob’s twelve sons) through Aaron – and the “Levites,” who could not claim Aaronic descent. Later a clear-cut distinction between “priest” and “Levite” developed.

Perhaps too much has been made of the title “Leviticus.” The predominant word is “priest,” which is used more often than “Levite.” Ideally the nation was a theocracy: every person was a priest, with Yahweh as king. However, such an ideal is less than practical, hence a representative principle was established. The firstborn son of each family should represent the family (13:2, 13; 22:29). But Yahweh appointed the Levites to serve in place of the firstborn sons: “Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn that opens the womb among the people of Israel” (Numbers 3:12).

Contents. Leviticus is sometimes said to set forth the law, meaning the ritual laws of Israel. In Hebrew usage, *tôrâ* means “instruction, discipline.” Thus the word is used of the instruction given by a father or mother (Proverbs 1:8; 3:1). Principles derived from scientific observations can be called “laws.” In some such sense “law” can designate the principles that govern the life

of Yahweh’s covenant people. In the Old Testament, “law” includes “statutes,” “judgments,” “commandments,” and “precepts.” Nonetheless, it is far more helpful to look upon Leviticus as a book of instructions for the priest-nation and their priestly representatives. These instructions concern cultic ritual and worship – the acts and attitudes which Yahweh’s people are to maintain if they are to have unbroken fellowship with Yahweh.

The central theme of Leviticus might well be expressed by “holiness.” Two questions are raised by this basic theme of holiness. First, how can sin be removed so people may become holy? Second, how can people maintain the holiness essential to fellowship with a holy god? Leviticus 1-16 deals essentially with the first question; and the closing portion of the book, with the second.

Biblical Concept of Holiness

Originally qādôš meant simple “set apart,” specifically for religious purposes. God is set apart from sin and sinful humanity. God created Adam for fellowship with him, but sin broke that fellowship, and Adam and Eve were driven from the garden. Yahweh’s moral excellence, then, became part of the concept of his holiness. Holiness thus came to have the derived or biblical meaning of moral excellence.

Sacrifices and Offerings

Offerings. According to 7:37, five “offerings” were included in the law which Yahweh revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai. One of these, always referred to in the plural as the “peace offerings,” was divided into three kinds, hence there were seven offerings in all.

- Cereal offering
- Burnt offering
- Sin offering
- Guilt (or trespass) offering
- Sacrifice

Role of the Person Making Offering. The offering was to represent the offerer’s own life – an animal he had raised or grain he had produced – and was to be of superior value (generally a male without blemish, or fine flour, or the best of firstfruits). The offerer placed his hand on the head of the victim, probably indicating personal identification (1:4). Whether the offerer confessed his sin at the time of presenting the sacrifice is open to question. Since the ritual of the Day of Atonement clearly stipulates such a confession (16:20), it seems reasonable that this was part of every ritual of sacrifice.

Name of Offering	Purpose	Kind of Offering
Holocaust or burnt offering 1:3-17 6:8:13	To atone for unwitting sin in general	Male without blemish from herd or flock or two birds
Sin offering 4:1-5:13 6:24-30	To atone for specific unwitting sin	Priest: bull Whole congregation: young bull Ruler: male goat

Name of Offering	Purpose	Kind of Offering
		One of people: female Goat or sheep Poor person: two birds; very poor: flour
Guilt or trespass offering 5:14-6:7 7:1-10	To atone for unwitting sin requiring restitution	Like sin offering (plus restitution)
Cereal offering 2:1-16 6:14-23	To secure or retain good will	Fine flour or cakes or wafers or firstfruits with oil, frankincense, salt, but no leaven or honey Usually accompanied by animal sacrifice
Peace offerings 3:1-17 7:11-21, 28-36	To render thanks to Yahweh...	Male or female from herd or flock without without blemish
Thank offering	For a blessing received	
Vow offering	Upon completion of a vow	
Freewill offering	From a glad heart	

The offerer was sacrificing not only a choice animal which he had raised but a substitute for himself. The whole sequence of acts he performed could not help but impress him with the penalty invoked for sin: it cost a life.

Significance of Blood. Throughout the law of the offerings the blood is emphasized. It lies also at the heart of the Christian faith, both in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and in the symbolism of the Lord's Supper. The fact is simple: the shedding blood means the death of the victim. The symbolic meaning lies in identifying the one making the sacrifice with the victim, for it symbolizes the death of the sinner. The penalty for sin is death, but the animal dies in place of the sinner.

Day of Atonement. The high priest was the intermediary between the holy God and the sinful people. In the symbolism of the tabernacle (later, the temple), Yahweh was present between the cherubim in the Holy of Holies. On the Day of Atonement, Aaron the high priest put off his priestly robes, donned simple white garments, and performed the ritual. First, he made

atonement for himself and his house (16:6), for he, too, was a sinner needing his sins covered. Then he offered a goat as sin offering for the people (v. 15). Both times he took blood and sprinkled it on the “mercy seat” in the Holy of Holies.

Aaron then took a live goat (scapegoat), laid both hands upon its head, and confessed over it “all the iniquities of the people of Israel and all their transgressions, all their sin; and he...put them upon the head of the goat” and sent the goat into the wilderness (v. 21).

Laws of Holiness

Holiness Code. Chapters 17-26 sometimes is called the Holiness Code. It is a loose collection of principles representing the way of life of people called to be holy, and might better be called the Torah of Holiness.

Law of Neighbor Love. When asked, “Which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus replied with two commandments, the first from Deuteronomy (“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”) and the second from Leviticus (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”; Matthew 22:36-40; cf. Leviticus 19:18). The law of neighbor love in Leviticus comes at the end of a group of somewhat miscellaneous laws that express holiness (see v. 2) in such ways as revering mother and father, keeping Sabbaths, avoiding idolatry, performing peace offerings, and leaving a portion of the harvest for the sojourner. The law of neighbor love follows admonitions against slander or “standing forth against the life” or taking vengeance or bearing a grudge against one’s neighbor. It is an excellent summary of one’s relationship to those in the community of everyday life.

Relevance of Leviticus Today

In his commentary on Leviticus, N. Micklem asks, “Has such a book any place in the Christian Bible?” and answers in the affirmative. However, not a few readers have found the book of no modern significance. Even Micah (6:6-8) and other prophets seem to question the validity of bloody sacrifices, and the author of Hebrews apparently set aside forever the levitical system (Hebrews 10:1-17).

But if the love of God is relevant today, so is Leviticus. Behind its stern requirements and strict regulations stands the loving heart of Yahweh who longs for the fellowship of his people. The same grace that snatched them from slavery in Egypt sought to maintain regular communion with them. God’s holiness insisted that for fellowship to be enjoyed, sin must be dealt with, and on terms acceptable to him. Leviticus, thus, is much more than a compendium of sacrifices and feasts, for it spelled out the terms of that fellowship.

If the sacrifice of Christ is relevant, and also the discussion in Hebrews, then so is Leviticus. The sacrifice of Christ, as he himself described it prior to the event, and his apostles afterwards, can be understood only in the light of the Jewish sacrificial system. The epistle to the Hebrews underscores this.

However, Leviticus is relevant at a different level. In his revelation of redeeming love – that he loved the sinner but hated the sin – Yahweh used the symbols of Leviticus as preparation for his fuller revelation in Christ (cf. Hebrews 1:1). The symbols or types have been replaced by a reality. Symbolic sacrifices are no longer necessary, for the real sacrifice of Christ has made

them so. Yet, the ancient symbols do contain much that is profitable for instruction. In fact, one cannot fully understand the New Testament concepts of sin and salvation apart from the Old Testament, which prepares for the new revelation.

Occasionally the comment is made that the God and Father of Jesus Christ is not the Old Testament Yahweh. Jesus Christ himself strongly denies this, in both his words and his sacrifice. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is a holy God, offended by sin, who requires that blood be shed to remove sin. He has provided the substitute “lamb” in the person of his own Son, through whom has come “atonement” (Romans 5:11, KJV; RES “reconciliation”). Christ memorialized this for the entire present age (“until he comes”) in the Lord’s Supper, using Old Testament language in the words of institution (Matthew 26:26-28 par. Exodus 24:8; cf. also 1 Corinthians 10:23-27). In faith sins are laid on the “Lamb of God,” who, like the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement, “takes away” sins (see John 1:29). Without understanding the language and symbols of Leviticus, how can one fully understand the deepest meaning of the New Testament?

Key Passages

Leviticus 16

Leviticus 16 can be described as the “inner sanctum” of the Torah. Here at the heart of Leviticus, the central book of the Pentateuch, are a few small steps for a man (the high priest), but a giant leap for humanity toward the heart of God.

Throughout the year, sacrifices at the Israelite sanctuary removed sins and severe physical ritual impurities from those who offered them there. All this contact with human faults and faultiness meant that the sanctuary itself needed periodic cleansing so that the holy Lord could continue to reside there. If it became excessively polluted, he would abandon it (cf. Ezekiel 9:3; 10:4, 18-19; 11:22-23). As a result, once a year, on the tenth day of the seventh month, the high priest performed a special complex of rituals to purify the entire sanctuary (Leviticus 16). Since this purgation involved the high priest approaching the Presence of God in the Most Holy Place, which he could enter only on this day (16:2, 12-16), it was the most awesome, climactic day of the year. Its biblical name is *yom hakkippurim* (23:27-18), “The Day of Purgation,” known today as Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement.

Purging moral faults and ritual impurities out of the sanctuary was not enough. The sins had to be permanently banished from the Israelite camp in which the Lord dwelt. So the high priest used a live goat, the so-called “scapegoat,” as a ritual “garbage truck” to haul the moral faults of all Israelites, both priests and laity, into the desert and leave them there (16:10, 20-22).

While the high priest was cleansing the sanctuary and camp on their behalf, the rest of the Israelites were to participate and thereby show loyalty to God by practicing self-denial through fasting and by resting from work (16:29, 31; 23:28-32). Through the purification of the sanctuary, the people themselves were morally purified from all their sins (16:30).

Leviticus 19:14-18

Continuing the idea of protection for disadvantaged members of society, verse 14 prohibits treating a physically challenged individual disrespectfully or harmfully by taking advantage of that person’s weakness.

God is powerful to defend the weak, and all are accountable to him: “The Lord watches over the stranger; He gives courage to the orphan and widow, but makes the path of the wicked tortuous” (Psalm 146:9; see also Psalm 82).

Holiness in the heart. Leviticus 19:16-18 addresses damaging behaviors and the underlying attitudes toward other people that cause or prevent them. Verse 16 speaks against spreading slander and profiting by it (lit., “standing upon”) the blood of a fellow person. The link between these is all too common: By starting malicious rumors, it is possible to hurt or even destroy a person and in the process gain advantage, whether simply to improve the relative status of one’s image at the expense of someone else or even to remove the victim in order to take something that belongs to him or her (cf. the story of Naboth’s vineyard in 1 Kings 21).

Remarkably, this law controls an internal attitude that is “in your heart.” No human legislative body would dream of formulating such a decree because not even the FBI, with the latest surveillance technology, can enforce it. The Lord can hold people responsible to love (19:18) rather than hate (v. 17) or covet (Exodus 20:17) because his perception penetrates human thought.

Outline of Leviticus

- I. Laws on Sacrifice (1:1-7:38)
 - A. Instructions for the Laity (1:1-6:7)
 - 1. The burnt offering (ch. 1)
 - 2. The cereal offering (ch. 2)
 - 3. The peace offering (ch. 3)
 - 4. The purification offering (4:1-5:13)
 - 5. The reparation offering (5:14-6:7)
 - B. Instructions for the Priests (6:8-7:38)
 - 1. The burnt offering (6:8-13)
 - 2. The cereal offering (6:14-18)
 - 3. The priest’s cereal offering (6:19-23)
 - 4. The purification offering (6:24-30)
 - 5. The reparation offering (7:1-10)
 - 6. The peace offering (7:11-36)
 - 7. Summary (7:37-38)
- II. Institution of the Priesthood (8:1-10:20)
 - A. Ordination of Aaron and his Sons (ch. 8)
 - B. Aaron’s First Sacrifices (ch. 9)
 - C. Judgment on Nadab and Abihu (ch. 10)
- III. Uncleaness and its Treatment (11:1-16:34)
 - A. Unclean Animals (ch. 11)
 - B. Uncleaness of Childbirth (ch. 12)
 - C. Unclean Diseases (ch. 13)
 - D. Cleansing of Diseases (ch. 14)
 - E. Unclean Discharges (ch. 15)
 - F. Purification of the Tabernacle from Uncleaness (ch. 16)
- IV. Prescriptions for Practical Holiness (17:1-27:34)

- A. Basic Principles about Sacrifice and Food (ch. 17)
- B. Basic Principles of Sexual Behavior (ch. 18)
- C. Principles of Neighborliness (ch. 19)
- D. Capital and Other Grave Crimes (ch. 20)
- E. Rules for Priests (ch. 21)
- F. Rules about Eating Sacrifices (ch. 22)
- G. Religious Festivals (ch. 23)
- H. Rules for the Tabernacle (24:1-9)
- I. A Case of Blasphemy (24:10-23)
- J. Sabbatical and Jubilee Years (ch. 25)
- K. Exhortation to Obey the Law: Blessing and Curse (ch. 26)
- L. Redemption of Votive Gifts (ch. 27)

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