

Getting Started with Leviticus

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Introduction to Leviticus

The book of Leviticus is *torah*, a set of instructions designed to teach the priests and the people of Israel the ritual requirements for living in the presence of a holy God. The Hebrew title is taken from the first word of the Hebrew text, “and he called,” which tells little about the actual content of the book. The more common title of “Leviticus” comes from the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (called the Septuagint/LXX ca. 200 BC) into the Latin Vulgate (ca. 420 AD) and eventually into English. The title should not, however, be understood as referring exclusively to the Israelite tribe of Levi. The term “Levite” occurs only three times in the book of Leviticus (Lev 25:32-33). However, priests [*kohen*], who were the direct descendants of Aaron, are referenced over 175 times in the 27 chapters of this book, despite it being the shortest book of the Pentateuch [Gen-Deut]. Thus the title “Leviticus” refers to the “Levitical priests” (cf. Deut 17:9, 18) although the book addresses the holiness of the whole people of God as well (Lev 15:2; 17:2), for Israel itself was to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6).

Leviticus moves away from the historical narrative approach that dominates Genesis and Exodus to a more instructional format, giving various rules, regulations, and requirements for maintaining holiness and cleanness and avoiding defilement, pollution, and uncleanness. It links into the greater narrative of the Pentateuch in its opening verse, where God speaks to Moses from the Tent of Meeting, or Tabernacle, upon which the glory-cloud of God’s presence had just descended (Exod 40; cf. Lev 25:1). While Leviticus has two brief narratives of its own (Lev 10, 24), it is mostly ritual instructions to priests and the covenant community as a whole. Leviticus records Moses as receiving these instructions orally from God during the year the Israelites were at Mount Sinai (Lev 4:1; 6:1, 24; 7:28). One can assume it was written down in a manner similar to what was explicitly commanded in Exodus (Exod 17:14), although no author is specifically identified as the writer.

Leviticus also connects to Deuteronomy by giving instructions regarding festival days (Lev 23; cf. Deut 16), and Sabbatical years (Lev 25; cf. Deut 15), and both conclude with the covenantal blessings and curses (Lev 26; cf. Deut 27-28). Leviticus seems to discuss the general laws and elaborate on how they are to be implemented. For example, the apodictic command, “You shall not blaspheme,” that is given in principle in Exodus 20:7 is followed in Leviticus with a concrete situation where the penalty is actually assessed and executed on a particular blasphemer (Lev 24:10ff.).

Leviticus is composed of instructions to holy priests and to a holy people for how to ritually maintain themselves in the presence of a holy God. The central theme is recorded in Leviticus 11:44-45 (cf. 19:2): “I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.”

Content of Leviticus

Leviticus divides into two sections: 1) Leviticus 1-16 on ritual purity and the various responsibilities, duties, and requirements for the Levitical priests, and 2) Leviticus 17-27 on the requirements for the maintenance of the people of Israel as a holy people.

Chapters 1-7 introduce five sacrificial offerings in nine divine speeches. The first three sacrifices are those required for a worshiper to give thanks, praise or worship to God. The final two sacrifices are expiatory for atonement and for the removal of sin. The people presented and slaughtered their offerings at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and the priests took the various parts, fat, and blood inside to the altar; any extraneous parts were burned outside the camp. These sacrifices were a “soothing aroma for the Lord” (Lev 1:9, 13, 17) and performed in and for his presence (Lev 1:5, 10).

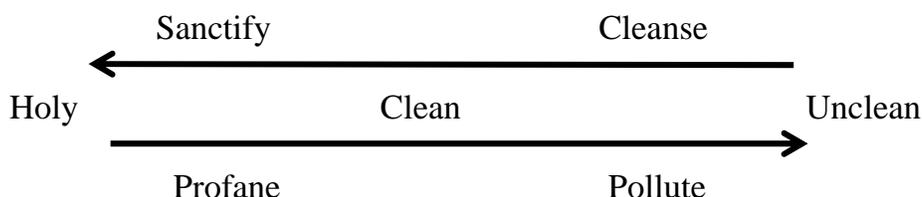
| Offering | What's Offered | Priest's role | Presenter's role | Purpose |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| Burnt/Whole [Lev. 1] | Male unblemished bulls, sheep, goats, birds, whole thing burned | Sprinkle blood on altar, arrange pieces on altar, wash innards, burn all | Present animal at tent, lay hand on head slaughter and cut up present it to priest | Morning/evening, aroma pleasing to the Lord, worship |
| Grain/Meal/Cereal [Lev. 2] | Grain, fine flour, no yeast, with salt, olive oil, incense | Burn a memorial portion on altar, eat the rest | Present it to priest | First fruits to worship for provisions |
| Fellowship/Peace [Lev. 3] | Male/female unblemished cattle, sheep, goat, fat portions burned | sprinkle blood on altar, burn fat portions, eat the meat [no blood] | Present animal at tent lay hand on head slaughter and cut off fat portions, eat some | Thanks offering, vow completion, freewill offering communal meal |
| Sin [Lev. 4] Expiatory | Priest: bull Leader: male goat Commoner: female goat, or sheep Poor: dove/pigeon Very poor: fine flour | Put blood on horns of altar, pour out rest, burn fat portions, eat the meat [no blood] | Present animal at tent, lay hand on head, slaughter, cut off fat skin and burn head, skin, and offal outside the camp, confession | For making atonement, for purification, for unintentional sin, cleansing |
| Guilt/Reparation [Lev. 5] Expiatory | Ram or lamb fat portions burned | Blood sprinkled on altar, burn fat portions, eat the meat [no blood] | Present animal at tent, slaughter the animal, cut off fat | Atone for unintentional sins, make restitution+20%, cleansing |

Sacrifices were ubiquitous in ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cultures from the earliest time periods, so these priestly rituals were not late insertions into the religion of Israel (Gen 4:4ff; 8:20; ch. 22; cf. ANE ritual texts). In Israel the blood and fat were two substances that were not to be eaten (Lev 7:22-27.). The presenter's laying hands on the

head of the animal was a process by which the presenter identified with the animal. The animal died as a substitute for the presenter, dramatizing the substitutionary or vicarious nature of atonement and that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 3:23). This whole sacrificial system foreshadows John the Baptist’s announcement declaring Jesus as the “lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Leviticus 8-10 is a narrative section where Moses, under God’s direction, oversaw the ordination and installation of Aaron and his sons into the priesthood. Moses offered the sacrifices, sprinkled the blood, and anointed them with oil while Aaron donned the Urim and Thummim and consecrated priestly garments. On the eighth day Aaron and his sons began their ministry, presenting sacrifices to the Lord as the entire assembly was gathered to see the glory of the Lord appear (Lev 9:4, 6, esp. 24). The solemn ritual context was shattered when Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s sons, offered an unholy fire before the Lord and were themselves consumed by divine fire. Aaron was told not to tear his clothes in grief. The tragic incident was followed with instructions on the necessity of distinguishing between the holy, common, clean and unclean, as well as with a stern warning against drinking wine in the Tent of Meeting area (Lev 10:9-10). The priests were directed to be the teachers of Israel on these ritual matters.

Leviticus 11-16 continues this theme by presenting instructions on how to distinguish between what was holy, clean and unclean as summarized on this chart of the three purity states in the middle and four outer transitional processes (Wenham, *Leviticus*, 19).



Chapter 11 begins with kosher dietary laws for land animals (chew the cud, split the hoof; no pork), aquatic animals (fins and scales; no lobster), birds (no birds of prey) and insects (hoppers allowed). These dietary laws were rescinded by Christ (Mk 7:19) and later in the book of Acts (11:5-12). Chapter 12 follows up with purification rites after childbirth and chapters 13-14 discuss handling infectious skin diseases that were formerly called “leprosy” but are probably better understood as psoriasis. Chapter 15 discusses semen and menstrual discharges and how to handle those moving from uncleanness back to cleanness. The section concludes with the Day of Atonement, elaborating on how to keep the sanctuary holy even when the high priest intrudes into the holy of holies with the atonement blood that was placed on the mercy seat on top of the ark. One goat was killed and the other, the scapegoat, was sent out to Azazel or the wilderness, signifying a ritual of the riddance of sin from the community and the substitutionary nature of atonement for the entire community (Lev 16).

The final section of Leviticus chapters 17-27 is what has come to be known as the Holiness Code (chs. 17-26) because of its emphasis on the holiness of the people of God. Chapter 17 deals with the centrality of the Tent of Meeting as the place of sacrifice and forbids the eating of blood. Sexual boundaries are set in chapter 18 where incest,

homosexuality, and bestiality are forbidden. Warnings are given against following Egyptian or Canaanite practices that had defiled the land. Echoes of the Ten Commandments are heard in the potpourri of apodictic, “you shall not,” type of instructions given in chapter 19; to honor parents, to not lie or steal, and to not pervert justice. Holiness was to be based on the character of God. It is here that the golden rule of loving one’s neighbor as oneself and extending community love to foreigners is directed. Specific punishments for various sins are explicated in chapter 20. Chapters 21 and 22 return to the theme of the maintenance of priestly holiness in terms of setting the boundaries on who a priest was allowed to marry and what maladies, such as blindness, disqualified one from the priestly office.

Leviticus 23 lists five appointed feasts as holy days sacred to the community. There are two spring feasts when the wheat and barley are harvested and three fall feasts when the olives, figs and grapes are harvested.

| Feast | Reference | Time | Purpose |
|---|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Passover/Unleavened bread—pilgrimage | Lev 23:4-8; Ex 12; Deut 16 | Spring [March/April--7 days] | Deliverance from Egypt remembered/celebrated |
| Weeks [Pentecost] —pilgrimage | Lev 23:15-21; Num 28; Deut 16 | 50 days after Passover; [May/June] | End of spring wheat/barley harvest |
| Trumpets [Rosh Hashanah] | Lev 23:23-25; Num 29 | Fall [Sept/Oct] first of the year | Sound the shofar, new year |
| Day of Atonement [Yom Kippur] | Lev. 23:26-32; ch. 16 Num 29 | 10 days after Trumpets [Sept/Oct] | 2 goats, blood in holy of holies, confession |
| Feast of Tabernacles [Sukkot] —pilgrimage | Lev 23:33-43; Num 29; Deut 16 | 15 days after Trumpets [Sept/Oct--7 days] | Live in huts, remember wilderness wanderings |

Finally, chapter 25 describes the Sabbatical year in which the land was to have its rest by not being sown and that in the year of Jubilee which was every fiftieth year (7x7+1) liberty was to be proclaimed and everyone was to return to their ancestral property inheritance. It is significant that when Judah was sent into exile to Babylon in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible (2 Chron 36:21) it cites the fact that the land had not enjoyed its Sabbaths was one reason Israel was sent to Babylon for 70 years to make up for that longstanding infraction. Leviticus 26 concludes with the covenantal blessings and curses in a manner quite similar to those found in the closing of Deuteronomy, chapters 27-28. Chapter 27 of Leviticus seems to be an addendum on dedicating things [houses, fields, animals] to the Lord and on how those things are redeemed.

Critical approaches

Critics today link the book of Leviticus back into the 19th century JEDP theory, with Leviticus representing the “P” or “Priestly” document. Many have set the date for this alleged P document in postexilic times around 500 BC, reflecting the reconstituted Jewish agrarian/pastoral community rule as a hierocracy (priest ruled) under the Persians in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. This conjectured setting is contrary to the explicit comments in the text which repeatedly feature God verbally giving instructions to Moses at Sinai (Lev 1:1; 25:1). Describing the Urim as part of the priestly attire (Lev 8:8) as

well as giving the repeated directions with regard to the Tent of Meeting (Lev. 1:1; 19:21) do not well suit a postexilic setting. While initially ritualized religion was seen as advanced and hence late, it is clear now from ancient Near Eastern ritual texts that priestly systems of sacrifices and festivals are very ancient, pre-dating Moses (cf. Gen 4:3f.; 7:2; 8:20f.). Furthermore the recent find of a “priestly” blessing text (Num 6:24-26) that is dated to 700 BC also calls for a reconsideration of these critical theories of the conjectured P source document.

Key Theological Themes

Holiness: The major theme in Leviticus is the directive for the Israelites to “be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2; cf. 11:45; 20:26). Yet it is the Lord himself who makes them holy (Lev 21:8; 22:9, 23). Furthermore, the priests particularly were directed “to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean” (Lev 10:10). The root idea of holiness (*qadosh*) is to be separated for a special purpose. While Lev 19 follows up with a list of ethical injunctions prescribing what it means to be holy (do not steal, do not lie...), the ritual instructions are also involved in sanctifying or making things holy. Places can be holy (Lev 6:26; 16:20), an offering/sacrifice can be holy (Lev 6:17; 27:9), and people, such as priests, were to be holy (Lev 21:6), as was the whole nation (Exod 19:6). There were even holy times (holidays) such as the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:12). God’s name was holy, and not to be profaned by idolatry (Lev 20:3) or by showing disrespect to the sacred offerings (Lev 22:2). Indeed, everything that belonged to the Lord, was to be considered holy including the land (Lev 27:28, 30). Peter calls New Testament believers to model this God-based-holiness through obedience to the ways of Christ (1 Pet 1:15-16). Likewise Paul draws deeply from the well of Leviticus imagery when he writes: “But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish” (Col 1:22).

All of life is sacred: One of the major implicit themes of Leviticus is that all of life is lived out in the presence of God. This is seen not only in the repetition of the refrain “I am the Lord your God” (Lev 18:2; 19:3-4, 10; 20:7) but in the huge number of times the phrase “before the Lord” occurs in all sections of this book (Lev 1:5; 4:4; 9:2; 14:16; 16:7; 19:22; 23:11; 24:8). Similarly, the reference to the sacrifices being a “soothing aroma to the Lord” (Lev 1:9; 2:9; 3:5) triggers the anthropomorphic image of God smelling the fragrance, which is a close and personal sense that indicates his presence. Thus all areas described in Leviticus, from high priestly rituals down to body emissions, and all of life, is lived out in the presence of a holy God. This book features a beautiful balance of the transcendence of a holy God as well as his immanence and close presence in every aspect of life.

Sin/sacrifice: When one views the ritual nature of the book of Leviticus one is immediately confronted with the questions of: why is there all this concern over holiness/cleanness/uncleanness? Why is there the listing of different sacrifices and the death of so many animals? The book of Leviticus declares that sin significantly impacts our relationship with a holy God. It is obvious in the case where God’s holiness is violated

and Aaron's sons perish by divine fire (Lev 10). It is manifest when the blasphemer of God's holy name is punished with death (Lev 24) or when the members of the community are cut off because they have desecrated that which is holy (Lev 19:8). In Leviticus the seriousness and deadliness of sin was symbolized in many of the sacrifices. But Leviticus also provides a solution by allowing an atonement (covering or ransom) of their sin. This is clearly seen in the book's central chapter on the Day of Atonement [*Yom Kippur*] where atonement (*koper*) for Aaron, his house and the whole community is made by killing a goat, placing its blood on the mercy seat (*kapporet*), then confessing sin over the head of the scape goat who, in a substitutionary manner, was sent out into the realm of Azazel or into the wilderness (Lev 16:17, 21-22). This foreshadows Christ's entering into heaven's Most Holy place and the presence of God with his own blood, once and for all being sacrificed to take away sin and to bring salvation to many (Heb 9:23-28; Rom 3:25). Jesus was the guilt offering, as Isaiah recognized (Isa 53:10, 6), who bore the sin of us all. He is the final sacrificial resolution of the sin problem from Gen. 3. God himself indeed provided the lamb (Gen 22:8) and these sacrifices in Leviticus brilliantly foreshadow and dramatize the ultimate work of redemption and the eternal restoration of humankind into God's holy presence based on the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Finally, the sacrificial message is applied by Paul to all believers when he admonishes Christians to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—that is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom 12:1).

Questions Raised by Leviticus

- 1) Compare and contrast the rituals of Leviticus with the ritual texts from the ancient Near East.
- 2) What kinds of intertextual relationship can be seen between Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel 34 (cf. also Lev 10:10/Ezek 22:26; Lev 18:5/Ezek 20:11)?
- 3) What connections do you see between Gen 3 and Lev 11-15?
- 4) How are the blessings and curses of Lev 26 and Deut 27-28 similar and dissimilar? Compare/contrast the Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16.
- 5) How do the cultic/ritual instructions of Leviticus manifest themselves in the cultic aspects of the book of Psalms?
- 6) How are the Levitical priesthood and cultic rituals viewed in Hebrews 8-10?
- 7) How do you understand the slaying of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10)?
- 8) In Lev 19:18 it says to love your neighbor but in 19:19 it says not to wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. How does one tell which laws are universal and transcultural and which are only for ancient Israel?
- 9) In Lev 16:10 the scapegoat is sent to Azazel. What are different understandings of that text?
- 10) What are some conjectured reasons for the various dietary and purity laws that have been purposed [dietary, polemic cultic, normalness view, uncleanness death association, etc.]? What are the pros and cons of each? What reasons does the text itself identify for these laws?