

Introduction

Background

Title: Leviticus means, “pertaining to the Levites.” The priests of Israel were from the tribe of Levi, and this book deals extensively with the laws and regulations of these priests.

Author: Moses.

Date Written: 1450-1410 BC.

Structure

Holy Sacrifices to a Holy God (1-16)				Holy Living Before a Holy God (17-25)			Appendix (26-27)			
(1-7) Law of Sacrificial Offerings		(8-10) Consecration of Aaronic Priesthood	(11-15) Laws for Purification	(16) Day of Atonement	(17-22) Personal Laws			(23-25) National Laws	(26) Blessings & Curses	(27) Laws for Vows
Offerings of the People (1-6)	Priestly Laws (6-7)				Worship of God Alone (17)	Non-Conformity to the Nations (18-20)	Priestly Holiness (21-22)			

The book of Leviticus is divided between a laws regarding making sacrifices to God (1-16) and laws regarding personal conduct (17-25). The book concludes with a statement of blessings and curses for keeping the covenant (26) and then the list of regulations for the keeping of vows. The subdivisions in the book are distinguished by the phrase, “Speak to the sons of Israel and say.”¹

Importance of Leviticus

Leviticus is probably one of the most ignored books in the bible and has derailed many a “read-through the bible” program. The regulations and sacrificial system seems to have very little application to a Christian today. While Christians will leave Leviticus as one of the last books of the bible to study, it is the first book studied by a Jewish child². However, the book of Leviticus has profound meaning for Christians today as well.

- No book of the bible contains more of the direct words of God than Leviticus.
- Leviticus is quoted about 40 different times in the New Testament³.

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stewart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2002), 43.

² F. Duane Lindsey. “Leviticus.” *Bible Knowledge Commentary*. (Victor Books, 1988), 163.

³ Ibid.

- A proper understanding of the book of Hebrews is impossible without an understanding of Leviticus.
- The Christian doctrine of atonement (the idea of transferring our guilt and sin to Christ) is foundational in Leviticus.
- Leviticus gives us a glimpse of the holiness of God.
- Leviticus calls Christians today to a life of holiness before our God.

Purpose

The book of Exodus concludes in Exodus 40 with the glory of God filling the Tabernacle. The book of Leviticus begins by God calling to Moses from the Tabernacle. The book of Leviticus defines for this redeemed people how to maintain proper fellowship with their glorious God who now dwells among them.

The nation has also just left Egypt and its culture and religion, and is about to enter into Canaan, where other cultures and religions will be influencing the nation. Leviticus provides stipulations to the people to remain separate (holy) from these cultures and to remain faithful to Yahweh.

Theme

The theme of the book of Leviticus comes from 11:45:

“For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy.”

Holiness is to be separate or sacred; to be set apart for specific purpose. First, God desires Israel to be set apart from the other nations. They should believe, act, and look differently than Egypt and Canaan.

Secondly, God has called Israel to be set apart for a specific purpose. God has called Israel apart to be a kingdom of priests. A priest is an intermediary between God and others. Israel is to be a kingdom which has been set apart to be an intermediary between God and the rest of the world. It was through the nation Israel that God desired to reach the world through his people, and thus fulfill the Abrahamic covenant, which says, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

In this book, God establishes specific laws for His people that would set them apart as a kingdom of priests with whom God dwells.

If the entire nation is to be a holy priesthood, then the priests of this nation are called to an even greater level of holiness. So, Leviticus sets out even more stringent requirements for the Levite priests. In Chapters 6-10 and 21-22, God lays out laws of purity for the priests, such as avoiding all dead bodies, limitations on marriage, prohibition on “imperfect” priests, and stringent requirements for the family of priests. To emphasize the seriousness of these stipulations, when they failed this, often they were killed, as were Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu (10:1-3)

The theme of the book is the holiness of God and His expectations for holiness amongst His people.

Holy Sacrifices to a Holy God

Atonement

God has called Israel to be a holy nation. However, as humans, that standard of holiness could not be perfectly kept. If God was to dwell in the midst of a sinful people, provision had to be made to atone for their sin and restore the people to the holiness. While God does call Israel to a high standard, he also provides a mechanism for forgiveness when they fail to meet the standard. God provides for the atonement of the people's sin.

Types of Sacrifices

Chapters 1-7 discuss five offerings or sacrifices to God. The first three offerings were for those who were in fellowship with God and desired to offer worship and express their gratitude to God. The last two offerings were for those who had sinned unwittingly against God and desired to restore fellowship with God.

In the Old Testament, payment was made by sacrificing, giving up, precious property. The most precious property in this age was cattle and sheep herds and the like. The sacrifice was a way to give up valuable wealth to demonstrate thanksgiving or pay the price of restitution to God.

Five Offerings to God

Name of Offering	What is Offered	Voluntary?	Purpose
Burnt Offering (Leviticus 1)	Bull, sheep, birds	Freewill	Thanksgiving for redemption (shed blood that redeems)
Grain Offering (Leviticus 2)	Cooked or uncooked grain	Freewill	Thanksgiving for provision (daily food)
Peace Offering (Leviticus 3)	Bull, sheep, goat	Freewill	Thanksgiving for the peace of God
Sin Offering (Leviticus 4)	Bull, sheep, goat, doves, grain	Required	Confession and Repentance for the unintentional breaking of the law.
Guilt Offering (Leviticus 5)	Ram	Required	Confession and Repentance for unintentional sins against God's holy things (including God's holy people).

The sin and guilt offerings represent a continuation of the rule of restitution. When we sin we incur a debt against our victims, and also against God. In Exodus we saw the rules of restitution owed to victims. In Leviticus, however, the rules of restitution require the people to repay the debt they owe God from our sins.

It is important to note that there are no offering provide for intentional sins. Those sins not covered by the sacrifices outlined in chapters 1-7, are left to be covered in the Day of Atonement (known today as Yom Kippur). In chapter 16, the principles of the Day of Atonement are outlined: a scapegoat, entering the holy of holies in the temple to plead for forgiveness from God.

Meaning of the Sacrifices

The book of Leviticus never explicitly discusses the significance of the sacrifices. The book seems more focuses on the mechanics of the sacrifice than the meaning. This is likely because the meaning of the sacrifice was already understood by the nation. The concept of animal and grain sacrifices was not a unique or novel concept to Israel. We have seen sacrifices throughout the biblical narrative up to this point, including sacrifices offered by Abel, Noah, and all the patriarchs. Even the pagan cultures had regular animal sacrifices. The importance to Moses was not to explain why they needed to sacrifice, because that was common knowledge in that day. What was critical to Moses,

was the method of sacrifice. It was to be done in a holy way, with clean animals, the first fruits, and only in the tabernacle.

Nonetheless, the sacrifices do have great meaning, both for Israel, and for us today. The sin and guilt offerings along with the Day of Atonement transferred the guilt of the sin from the persona and the nation to the animal, who then was killed as an example of the penalty of sin.

The ritual of the animal sacrifice was not the actual mechanism of the forgiveness of sins. There is nothing worthy in even a clean animal which could take the penalty of our sin. Furthermore, merely bringing a sacrifice to the tabernacle was not sufficient for the remission of sins. The animal sacrifices merely symbols:

Sacrifices were first and foremost a symbol of repentance on the part of the penitent. The bringing of the sacrifice in faith demonstrated that the sinner acknowledged his sin and trusted in God's mercy for forgiveness. Sacrifice with this faith was not effectual (Hosea 6:6 Hebrews 10:5-6)

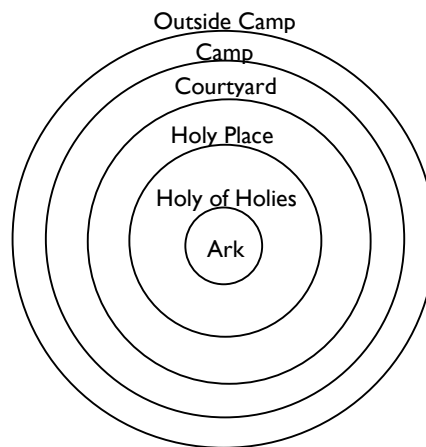
The sacrifices were a foreshadowing of the one, final and true sacrifice of Jesus Christ. While the animals given at the tabernacle were inadequate to take the punishment of sin, Christ was.

By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. (Hebrews 10:10-14)

The rule of restitution still applies today. When we sin, a debt is owed to God. However, we no longer must rely on animal sacrifices to atone for our sins. Instead, the debt has already been paid by God. According to Hebrews 9:11-16, the sacrifice of Christ serves as the atoning sacrifice once and for all. Praise be to Christ.

Laws of Cleanliness

The Levitical worldview is one of a series of separations. This separation is illustrated most clearly in the layout of the tabernacle in Exodus. The most holy place in the Israelite world is the Ark of the Covenant, where the very presence of God dwells. The ark resides inside the Holy of Holies, a place so sacred, that only the High Priest can enter once per year. This space is separated from the rest of the tabernacle by a veil, outside of which resides the incense altar in the Holy Place. The Holy Place is reserved only for the priests in execution of their priestly duties. The Holy Place is separated from the rest of the tabernacle by a curtain door. Outside is the courtyard of the temple, where the burning altar is housed. Only those worshippers who are ceremonially clean can enter the courtyard. The courtyard is also physically separated from the rest of the camp by a fence. Beyond this is the camp of Israel. But for those who have committed especially heinous offenses, they are too unclean to even be within the camp, and are exiled, removed even further from the presence of the holy God.



As one moves inward, each concentric ring is closer to the presence of God, and entrance requires more restrictive cleansing. One may not be guilty of sin, per se, but still be considered unclean in regards to moving to the next concentric circle closer to the presence of God.

The Israelites understanding of God's holiness goes beyond that of that of atonement for sin. Holiness itself, required a separation of all things which were "unclean." Cleanliness, in this context, is not a matter of righteousness and sin, but of purity and health. God desired not just that the Israelites live without sin, but that they live healthy and beneficial lifestyles.

Therefore, in addition to "moral issues," Leviticus also lays out laws of purification, which serve as practical public policies for the nation Israel. We must remember, to the eastern mind, there is no separation of church and state, secular and holy. As such Leviticus mixes civil, criminal, moral, religious, and property law in a most un-western way. But these ideas can not exist apart from each other, for the basis of all Levitical law is the God of Israel who rescued them from Egypt.

Dietary Laws -- Leviticus 11

As such, Leviticus has some practical public policy issues. For example, Leviticus 11 lays out strict dietary laws for the Jews. While today these laws may seem arbitrary. But these laws, besides keeping them distinct from the idolatrous cultures around them and besides reflecting the holiness of God, these laws kept the Israelites physically healthy. Considering that these were nomads with no refrigeration, living in a dirty camp environment. Avoidance of pork, shellfish, and rodents kept the people from dangerous bacterial infections.

Sexual Health Issues -- Leviticus 12, 15

Chapter 12 sets up boundaries for women who have recently given birth or who are menstruating. These rules are set up as a protection for women, rather than prohibitions on women engaging in the community. In the days before epidurals and modern birthing clinics, child birth was a very dangerous and difficult thing. By declaring a new mother unclean, that mother was prohibited from the daily chores of the home and required that the midwife take extra care in washing so as to prevent infectious disease, to which both the child and mother would be more susceptible.

The uncleanliness of a menstruating woman ensured proper hygiene, but also protected a woman with normal menstrual discomfort from the unwelcome advances of an demanding husband (15:19-24).

Chapter 15 is dealing with controlling sexually transmitted diseases. The "discharges" from both the man and woman are unnatural genital discharges which would be symptomatic of STDs such as gonorrhea. By limited exposure and prohibiting sexual relations while such discharge was present was an effort to prevent the spread of these diseases.

Public Health Issues -- Leviticus 13-14

The laws regarding leprosy in chapters 13-14 are prudent quarantines for a highly contagious disease. It is practical public health policy. The diseases described here, however, go beyond that of the technical Hansen's disease of today, but would include other communicable diseases of the skins, such as small pox and measles⁴. This was a practical limitation of a communicable disease and served to protect the entire camp from epidemics.

In addition, chapter 14 discusses the spread of some kind of mildew or rot in the homes of the people. Again, this practical public health policy attempted to contain the spread of potentially harmful conditions in the home to protect the health of the nation.

The uncleanliness due to skin diseases and mildew were not issues of sin, but of health. Purity and holiness were meant to protect the people, not just keep them from moral guilt.

⁴ R. Laird Harris. "Leviticus." Expositors Bible Commentary. Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998. Electronic edition STEP file).

Holy Living Before a Holy God

The Laws of Non-Conformity

One of God's primary motivation in the Levitical law is so to keep Israel unique and different from the nations around them, especially in their worship. Leviticus 18:3 specifically tells Israel to "not do what is done in the land of Egypt... nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan." To be holy means to be set apart from the cultural and religious practices of their neighbors.

The God of Leviticus is a God love, morality and life. The pagan gods of the surrounding nations were none of these three things. Sacrifice in Israel was not a human effort to obtain favor with a hostile God, but a response to a God who had first given himself to Israel in covenant relationship. The point of pagan religions was to move the god or goddess to look favorably upon the people and to change them or coerce them to act on their behalf. The Levitical revelation was aimed at changing the people for God's purposes (i.e. being a holy and separate nation of priests).

Sacrifices to God Alone – Leviticus 17

In Leviticus 17, people are prohibited from slaughtering animals outside the camp (17:3). All animals slaughtered, even for food, were to be brought to the tabernacle and first dedicated to the Lord (17:4). As a nation who was highly dependent on manna for their food, meat would have been a very small part of the diet. Most livestock would have been far more valuable as dairy animals or for their wool than for food. Therefore, most slaughtering outside the camp would not been for food, but as sacrifices to a pagan god⁵. No one would be allowed to slaughter anything outside the tabernacle, for they could always be hiding their pagan sacrifices as just a normal slaughter for meat. This is demonstrated by the stipulation against sacrificing to the goat demons placed in the midst of the regulations requiring proper slaughter of animals (17:7).

Sexual Regulations – Leviticus 18

In the prohibition against sacrificing to the goat demons, those participating in this practice are said to be playing the harlot (17:7). All throughout scripture, idolatry is equated with prostitution. God wants Israel to see him as their husband, and any worship of other gods is adultery. But there is also a more direct correlation between idolatry and sexual immorality.

Both Egyptian and Canaanite religion focused around fertility cults. The fertility gods were said to affect not just child bearing, but also the fruit of the field and the procreation of the flocks. When these gods engaged in sexual acts, their offspring was found in better harvests and increasing flocks. Therefore, if you wanted to have a good crop, you would go to the temple of these gods and lie with a temple prostitute in the hopes that your sexuality would "turn on" the fertility gods and thereby ensure you of a good harvest.

As a result the practice of Egyptian and Canaanite religion and culture included sexual perversions, such as incest, adultery, homosexuality, and bestiality (18:6,19-23). Prohibitions against these sexual immorality was not, then, just to preserve the sanctity of the sexual union within the institution of marriage, but was a further prohibition against idolatry and was a matter of holiness, or being set apart from the cultures around them. The worship of Yahweh was to have no sexual connotations at all. Religion and sex were to be uniquely separate in Israel's worship.

Strangely tucked into these sexual prohibitions is also the prohibition about offering children to the god Molech. This is not as out of place as it may first seem in a chapter dealing with sexual immortality. The worship of Molech often included human sacrifice, and such a sacrifice was often after the child would have been ritualistically molested.

⁵ Lindsey, 199.

Cultural Regulations – Leviticus 19-20

Not only are the prohibitions sexual, but also encompass other cultural practices apart from which God wants his people. Israel's neighbors would routinely cut themselves, pierce themselves, or tattoo their bodies as part of their religious practices. As such, Leviticus prohibits not just divination and giving of their daughters as temple prostitutes, but also tattoos and body piercing (19:26-31). God wants his people to not blend with the surrounding nations but to be clean, separate, and holy (20:22-26).

Application for Today

Many of the prohibitions have direct relevance for us today, having been reaffirmed in the New Testament (i.e. sexual morality, refraining from idolatry). Others prohibitions are cultural, where God wanted the people to remain observably different than the nations around them (e.g. tattoos, body piercing, butchering animals outside the camp). While these cultural prohibitions may not have relevance today, we still need to ask, what makes us different from the culture around us? Are there practices which are more related to modern idolatry, and should therefore be avoided? When people look at Christians, do they see a difference in our attitudes about sex? Do we follow the trendy pop culture or do we follow the wisdom of God? As the world looks at the church, is there anything there worth following, or do we mirror the world such that there is no pragmatic power left in the redemption?

National Laws of Holiness

The Festivals

Source: Tyndale Book of Bible Charts and Maps

Festival	What it Celebrated	It's Importance
Passover One day (Leviticus 23:5)	When God spared the lives of Israel's firstborn children in Egypt and freed the Hebrews from slavery	Reminded the people of God's deliverance
Unleavened Bread Seven days (Leviticus 23:6-8)	The exodus from Egypt	Reminded the people they were leaving the old life behind and entering a new way of living
Firstfruits One day (Leviticus 23:9-14)	The first crops of the barley harvest	Reminded the people how God provided for them
Pentecost (Harvest) One day (Leviticus 23:15-22)	The end of the barley harvest and beginning of the wheat harvest	Showed joy and thanksgiving over the bountiful harvest
Trumpets One day (Leviticus 23:23-25)	The beginning of the seventh month (civil new year)	Expressed joy and thanksgiving to God
Day of Atonement One day (Leviticus 23:26-32)	The removal of sin from the people and the nation	Restored fellowship with God
Shelters Seven days (Leviticus 23:33-43)	God's protection and guidance in the wilderness	Renewed Israel's commitment to God and trust in his guidance and protection

The Institution of Festivals.

In contrast to the pagan hedonistic and sexual practices, the worship of Yahweh was to provide life and benefit to the nation. This was to be appreciated and celebrated in the national festivals. The worship of Yahweh was not just a list of prohibitions, but included a celebration of holiness and the

provision of their God. In addition to the weekly celebration of the Sabbath, there are 7 festivals, representing 19 days when national holidays are celebrated.

The Year of Jubilee – Leviticus 25

Another practical public policy found in Leviticus is the Sabbath years and the years of Jubilee. Every seven years the land was to be kept fallow. This is prudent agriculture, allowing the land to rest and rebuild its nutrients. We already saw in Exodus that every seven years, slaves were to be set free.

Every 48 years was the year of Jubilee. Here not only are the fields to rest, but all land sold during the prior 49 years was to be returned to its original owner. This was prudent land distribution, ensuring that the poor would always have land- a sort of forced land reform. But more importantly it reminded the people that the land never really belonged to them in the first place. Instead the land always did and always will belong to God (25:23).

Application for Today

The call of Israel to be holy priesthood applies to Christians as well today. 1 Peter 2:9-10 states that we were called out of darkness into the light, and that we are now a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” Why? For what purpose are we called out? The same purpose as Israel; that is, to proclaim God to the world around us.

Furthermore, just as God called Israel and the Levite priests to a higher accountability, to a higher level of morality, so he also calls those in His church. 1 Peter 1:15-26 tells us also to “be holy for I am holy.” We are to be set apart, different, than the world around us. We are to be seen as unique in this world. Only then will the world recognize the holiness and excellence of God. If there is not difference between us and the world, then Christianity is proven to be ineffectual and of only minor value. We then, need to be set apart.

Often we look at God’s commandments as intrusive and just trying to rob us of innocent fun. But as shown here, most often God’s commandments have very pragmatic purposes. Namely, to protect us from harm or evil. That is why Paul, when discussing our freedom from this law says “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. (1 Cor. 10:23-24). Our obedience to God’s commandments are for our own good, not for God’s good.

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