

## INTRODUCTION TO LEVITICUS

### 1. WHY STUDY LEVITICUS?

A. One commentator wrote: “Leviticus is good news. It is good news for sinners who seek pardon, for priests who need empowering, for women who are vulnerable, for the unclean who covet cleansing, for the poor who yearn for freedom, for the marginalized who seek dignity, for animals that demand protection, for families that require strengthening, for communities that want fortifying and for creation that stands in need of care. All these issues and more are addressed in a positive way in Leviticus.” Derek Tiball, “The Message of Leviticus.”

1. This is not the usual concept of Leviticus that suffers from a poor reputation with most people.

a. It inspired two chapters in the book “How to Enjoy the Boring Parts of the Bible by Philip Rosenbaum.

b. Given this attitude, it is no wonder that some looked at it as relevant only for the Mosaic Age, while still others expressed discomfort at the extreme severity of its laws, or simply treated it with indifference and doubted whether it was the word of God.

c. One reader, having finished reading Leviticus, confessed that when she read the book she wondered what God was up to, and opined that maybe the Almighty got up on the wrong side of the bed.

2. The ancient writer Origen recognized the problem.

a. In reaction to the negative attitude toward Leviticus of his day, he wrote, “But begin from the principle that ‘the law is spiritual’ if we are to understand and explain all the lessons that are read.” He added, “For my part, and because I believe what my Lord Jesus Christ has said, I think that there is not a ‘jot or tittle’ in the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:18) that does not contain a mystery.”

b. Despite Origen’s hopes, however, Leviticus is probably among the least read books of Scripture, at least by Christians.

i. It is rarely quoted in the New Testament, although one verse – Lev. 19:18 – stands as a centerpiece within Jesus’ teaching about the law (Mark 12:31) and has been greatly influential within discussions of New Testament teaching.

ii.

B. So why would anyone want to study the book of Leviticus.

1. If this study were on the Psalms, Romans, or Hebrews, we would not have to ask that question.

2. If this study were primarily for a Jewish audience we would not have to ask that question.

3. But it is a difference matter for a class of Christians studying Leviticus. This question must be answered or we will not bother to penetrate its full meaning for today.

4. These attitudes stand in contrast with earlier Jewish attitudes.

a. Leviticus was valued so highly by the Jews that it was the first book of the Torah to which they introduced their children at school.

b. It was the first place they started when instilling the values and rules necessary for daily living.

c. Leviticus contains more direct talk by God than any other book of the Bible. It is placed at the heart of the Torah or Pentateuch, which forms the foundation of all Scripture.

d. However, apart from the narratives in chapters 8-10 and 24:10-23, and covenant blessings and curses in chapter 27, Leviticus consists of laws.

e. Even the narratives contain divine laws embedded in them (10:8-11; 24:15-22), and the events described in chapters 8-10 are ritual ones closely related to the sacrificial procedures prescribed in laws of the previous chapters (1-7).

C. What do laws addressed to an ancient, obsolete culture have for modern Christians?

1. Ritual laws, which take up much of Leviticus, are particularly challenging because they were designed to regulate a worship system that is foreign to us, their meanings are not obvious to us, and explanations provided by the text are few and cryptic.

2. Instructions for sacrifices, which involve slaughtering animals for no apparent practical purpose, include a lot of details that can be tedious and gory unless you are a butcher, veterinarian, or biologist.

3. Moreover, even if we wanted to participate in such worship practices we could not do so because the Temple and its Aaronic priesthood exist no more.

D. In the New Testament Paul explains that the law was a “tutor” to lead us to Christ (Gal. 3:24).

1. This means that for centuries God was teaching people important theological aspects about his eternal plan. When the Son of God came into this world to fulfill this plan, a treasure of theological images and ideas was ready at hand.

2. People knew exactly what God meant by sacrifice because God had taught it through Israel. People knew what was meant by atonement, purification, or consecration because the people of God had been living out these rituals for centuries. People were fully aware of the differences between clean and unclean or between holy and unholy because those categories had been applied to every detail of life for as long as folks could remember.

3. What the people throughout the Old Testament period did not have was the final and complete disclosure of how all of this fit together in the divine plan – in short, how it would all be fulfilled by the Messiah so that the messianic kingdom of peace and righteousness could be established.

4. But when God sent his Son into the world to make purification for sins once and for all through the shedding of his precious blood (Heb. 1:1-3), all these ancient rites found their greatest meaning and ultimate goal.

## 2. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF LEVITICUS?

Exodus through Numbers is a narrative about the origins of Israel as the people of God. One function of this narrative is to fulfill the promise made to the Patriarchs that God would enter into a special relationship with them. As Gen. 12-50 centered on the pledge of posterity and as Numbers 10:11-Deut. 34:12 focuses on the gift of land, so Exodus 1:1-Num. 10:10 highlights in its narrative the nature and terms of the

covenant relationship. Woven into this narrative are the instructions for the people's worship of God. This material is not a haphazard mixture of story and law. Rather it is the account of God's bringing a nation to birth, a story embellished with rules for worship and civil order. Both story and law are essential to the creation of a new nation. In Leviticus the narrative comes to the forefront only in a few specific instances (Chs. 8-10; 16; 24). The laws are set in speeches that God gave Moses to deliver to the congregation. The material is thus designed for oral instruction.

The message of holiness pervades the book of Leviticus. At its core, holiness is separation. It describes that which is set apart from the ordinary, the mundane, the fallen and the pagan, and that which is set apart to a person or set apart for a purpose. Three major currents of holiness flow back and forth, together and apart, in Leviticus. The first current is a statement, the second a promise and the third a command.

1. The statement – God is holy. God's holiness constitutes his deepest and innermost nature. God's revelation of himself in the words, "I am holy," is the fundamental premise on which Leviticus is built (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26; 21:8). Everything that is employed in offering him worship – whether priests, animals, altars or pots and pans – had to be set apart for his exclusive use and must partake of his holy character. His holiness must never be breached, compromised, or trivialized. When his holiness is affronted, the offence must be quickly repaired through the offering of sacrifice. His holiness is dramatically portrayed in the worship of Israel and ethically portrayed in the laws given to Israel. It is in observing the one and obeying the other that his people will manifest his holiness to the world.

2. The command – Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy (Lev. 10:3). The command, however, is premised on grace. The formative event in Israel's experience was deliverance from the bondage of Egypt. As a result, they became bound to him by unique ties of gratitude and obligation. They became his servants, set apart from other nations not only to obey his will, but also to display his character in the world. Although holiness is predominate in the Holiness Code (chs. 17-26), and the first call to be holy appears in 11:44-45, it is implicit in the earlier chapters that dealt with worship and priesthood. Holiness is comprehensive; no area of life is untouched by it. If we wish to be God's holy people today, we must acknowledge the wide-ranging claims of holiness more than we sometimes do. As Leviticus illustrates, they affect our lives as members in a family, as

citizens in a society, as workers in a marketplace, and as consumers in a global economy, as much as they affect us as worshippers in a church.

3. The promise – I am the Lord, who makes you holy. The responsibility of holiness is awesome, but it is made lighter by the promise of God. The goal of holiness is not to be reached unaided. The promise of God's transforming power continues to inspire his people to undergo change so that they manifest his likeness in the world more and more. Christians, no less than Israel, are called to be holy and to pursue holiness in every dimension of their lives. Like Israel, we have been set free by Christ, not so that we might continue to live in sin or with indifference to God, rather we have been set free to be holy.

### 3. WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF LEVITICUS?

A. Leviticus is part of the Pentateuch; it is not a free standing book. It is structurally and thematically linked to Exodus, continuing Israel's experience with God from the point of where divine communication comes from the tabernacle inside the desert camp instead of from Mount Sinai outside the camp. Leviticus ends when Numbers 1 resumes the account of Israel's journey that is followed by organization of the community in preparation for conquering Canaan.

Between preparations for the worship system through construction of the Tabernacle in Exodus and resumption of the march toward the Promised Land in Numbers, Leviticus fills a crucial niche in an ongoing process: constitution of the core values and practices that makes the Israelites one holy nation not only under God, but also with his holy Presence in their midst. Thus Leviticus is situated at the structural and conceptual heart of the Pentateuch as its third book..

B. Leviticus, the Septuagint name for the book, is not primarily about the Levites. Numbers tells more about the Levites as a whole. Leviticus is not even primarily about the Aaronic priests, who belonged to the tribe of Levi. Rather, it is about God's call to a life of holiness in relation to himself and other members of the community, introduced with the words, "The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting" (Lev. 1:1). This opening has provided the Hebrew name of the book, *wayyiqra'*, "Then he [Yahweh] called. . . ."

C. A strong case can be made for the centrality of Chapter 16, both because it contains the idle divine speech and because its culmination of ritual matters (chs. 1-16) pave the way for laws on holy living to be observed by a morally cleansed community (chs. 17-27).

D. The central position of chapter 19 focuses attention on the astounding depth of its teaching with regard to the nature of holiness, which is the overriding theme of the entire book. After its introduction, the rest of chapter 19 deals with preserving divine-human and human-human relationships. The connection is obvious: the way God expects his people to be holy as he is holy is by leading holy lives that are in harmony with his relational character. While not all aspects of life are covered, the variety of examples provided emphasizes the comprehensive scope of practical holiness.

While love as the underlying principle of holy living is implied throughout Leviticus 19, it surfaces in verse 18b as the idle injunction of the chapter of 37 verses, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” So love is at the heart of Leviticus 19, a pivotal chapter of Leviticus, the central book of the Torah, which is the foundation of Scripture (Matt. 22:36-40).

#### 4. WHAT IS THE MESSAGE OF LEVITICUS?

A. If we take the New Testament seriously, we should reevaluate our attitude toward Leviticus.

1. The “all scripture” that Paul said was inspired of God includes the Old Testament.

2. More specifically, the New Testament refers to the Old Testament ritual system in order to explain what Christ has accomplished and continues to accomplish, indicating that such knowledge is at least helpful and may be indispensable to understand and appreciate the fullness of salvation through Christ (e.g., Luke 24:27; 1 Cor. 5:7; 15:20; Heb. 7-10; Rev. 4-5).

3. This doctrine of the typological blood of the sacrifices and the efficacious blood of Christ, however, is not limited to Leviticus and Paul. It has been called the scarlet line of redemption that begins in Abel’s sacrifice and climaxes in the blood of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). Jesus said it plainly: “I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:15).

B. As shadows and prototypes the ancient sacrifices that were necessarily repeated many times and were officiated by faulty priests could not take away sin (Heb. 10:1-4). In considering the Biblical doctrine of atonement, it is good to begin with the problem that atonement is designed to cure – sin. It is natural to avoid this question. After all, to err is human; to deny responsibility is as old as our first parents. The God of the Bible punished sin (Ex. 34:7). Leviticus calls sin a violation of God’s laws – moral, ceremonial and ethical. The emphasis of the so-called holiness code is on the moral and ethical. If sin is a violation of God’s laws, for atonement to be valid it must provide for forgiveness. The Ten Commandments are more than conditions under which a holy God would maintain a covenant with a most favored nation, they are the eternal principles set by a holy God. He did not claim a covenant relation with the Canaanites, but when they indulged in an excess of idolatry, adultery, violence, and deceit, it was called sin. Their cup of iniquity was full, and they were judged. Sin was not mere faithlessness to a favored relation. It was and is violation of God’s holy law. The sacrificial system, especially the Day of Atonement, addressed the need for forgiveness.

1. Because the sacrifices were performed on earth where people could experience them by participation, they served a useful purpose as illustrations.

2. Although each kind of sacrifice is an inadequate illustration, this very inadequacy benefits us by breaking down the complexity so that we can grasp one aspect at a time.

C. So why not skip Leviticus and just go straight to the “real thing” in the New Testament?

1. By analogy, why should a medical student spend time with distorted, analyzed, two-dimensional pictures, diagrams, and explanations in an anatomy and physiology textbook when real, living human bodies are available for examination?

2. The answer is that the textbook teaches the budding physician what on earth he or she is looking at when confronted with the real thing.

3. Similarly, we need Leviticus as a textbook so that when we encounter Christ’s sacrifice we can gain the full impact.

D. The animal sacrifices symbolized the way God extends mercy with justice to faulty people.

1. The rituals revealed his loving character and his desire for restoration and maintenance of intimate interaction with those whom he claimed as his own.

2. While the ritual worship and theocratic civil institutions of ancient Israel are long gone, the God revealed by them remains the same; herein lies the timeless significance of Leviticus for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians.

E. The laws of Leviticus were not isolated from practical human experience; rather, their details were given in the context of a grand story that recounts Israel's formation from an oppressed group of slaves to a powerful kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6) among whom the deity dwelt (Ex. 25:8).

1. Divine laws addressed real life and were intended to shape its destiny with God.

2. In this sense each law is kind of a distilled story.

F. Through Leviticus we can learn what God is like in relation to ourselves and how we can effectively interact with him across the boundary between the seen and the unseen spheres.

1. While our modern situation is outwardly different from that of the Israelites in significant respects, we too can participate in transactions with God (through prayer rather than animal sacrifices) and profit from their experience because it parallels our own on a deeper level.

2. The Lord continues to deliver us from slavery (to sin) and transforms us into a "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Pet. 2:9) so that he can dwell with us and be our God (Rev. 21:3).

G. Although laws in Leviticus designed to protect and enhance divine-human and human-human relations outside worship are routinely dismissed as Mosaic civil legislation that served only the Israelite theocracy, they encapsulate timeless and valuable principles.

1. Many of them exemplify subprinciples of the foundational principle of love, which underlies the moral/ethical Ten Commandments (Ex. 20; Deut. 5; cf. Matt. 22:26-40; Rom. 13:8-10).

2. It is true that the “civil” laws of Leviticus and the Pentateuch are dressed in the garb of an ancient civilization, they contain principles that can be applied in our own life situations.

H. Of course, discovering new principles threatens our status quo, especially when they are introduced with a “thus saith the Lord.”

1. Leviticus is not welcome in an environment of feel-good, self-help, cafeteria-style religion, nor or other parts of the Bible.

2. George Barna explains why not: “In the last quarter-century it seems that we have learned how to sell Bibles but now how to sell what’s in the Bible. Increasingly, people pick and choose the Bible content they like or feel comfortable with, but ignore the rest of God’s counsel. This tendency seems especially prolific among young adults and teenagers. What can we do to elevate the prominence, credibility, and perceived value of God’s Word in the eyes of a fickle and distracted public?”

## 5. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEVITICUS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT?

A. WORSHIP. The New Testament as a whole continues to call the people of God to be holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16; Matt. 5:48), and to reinforce the insights of Leviticus into the nature and importance of holiness. Lessons for worshipping the holy God and for maintaining God’s presence in the community of the faithful are abundant throughout the New Testament, which also offers perspectives on the priestly role of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9).

B. LAW AND GRACE. It is sometimes stated that salvation under the old covenant was obtained by performing works of the law, while salvation under the new covenant is obtained by grace. Careful study of the Torah as well as the rest of the Old Testament shows that people are never saved by their own efforts, but only by the grace of God. Under both covenants all sinned and came short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). In all dispensations God has graciously received obedience believers. This was true of God’s covenant with Abraham and the Mosaic Law did not annul it (Gal. 3:6-18). Hebrews, discussing the Old Testament sacrifices stated plainly, “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin” (Heb. 10:4).

C. HEBREWS. It has been said that Hebrews is a great commentary on Leviticus. It frequently quotes or cites Leviticus, especially the Day of Atonement passage (ch. 16). Especially noteworthy are chapters 6-10 which give an insight into the community to which Hebrews was written, and give the New Testament significance of the Levitical ritual. The sacrifice of Christ is the true form of these realities; thus it is a sacrifice that never needs repeating.