

Leviticus

Scripture: Leviticus

Code: MSB03

Title

The original Hebrew title of this third book of the law is taken from the first word, translated “And He called.” Several OT books derive their Hebrew names in the same manner (e.g., Genesis, “In the beginning”; Exodus, “Now these are the names”). The title “Leviticus” comes from the Latin Vulgate version of the Greek OT (LXX)¹ *Leuitikon* meaning “matters of the Levites” (25:32, 33). While the book addresses issues of the Levites’ responsibilities, much more significantly, all the priests are instructed in how they are to assist the people in worship, and the people are informed about how to live a holy life. New Testament writers quote the book of Leviticus over 15 times.

Author and Date

Authorship and date issues are resolved by the concluding verse of the book, “These are the commandments which the LORD commanded Moses for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai” (27:34; cf. 7:38; 25:1; 26:46). The fact that God gave these laws to Moses (cf. 1:1) appears 56 times in Leviticus’ 27 chapters. In addition to recording detailed prescriptions, the book chronicles several historical accounts relating to the laws (see 8–10; 24:10–23). The Exodus occurred in 1445 B.C. (see Introduction to Exodus: Author and Date) and the tabernacle was finished one year later (Ex. 40:17). Leviticus picks up the record at that point, probably revealed in the first month (Abib/Nisan) of the second year after the Exodus. The book of Numbers begins after that in the second month (Ziv; cf. Num. 1:1).

Background and Setting

Before the year that Israel camped at Mt. Sinai: 1) the presence of God’s glory had never formally resided among the Israelites; 2) a central place of worship, like the tabernacle, had never existed; 3) a structured and regulated set of sacrifices and feasts had not been given; and 4) a High-Priest, a formal priesthood, and a cadre of tabernacle workers had not been appointed. As Exodus concluded, features one and two had been accomplished, thereby requiring that elements three and four be inaugurated, which is where Leviticus fits in. Exodus 19:6 called Israel to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Leviticus in turn is God’s instruction for His newly redeemed people, teaching them how to worship and obey Him.

Israel had, up to that point, only the historical records of the patriarchs from which to gain their knowledge of how to worship and live before their God. Having been slaves for centuries in Egypt, the land of a seemingly infinite number of gods, their concept of worship and the godly life was severely distorted. Their tendency to hold on to polytheism and pagan ritual is witnessed in the wilderness wanderings, e.g., when they worshiped the golden calf (cf. Ex. 32). God would not permit them to worship in the ways of their Egyptian neighbors, nor would He tolerate Egyptian ideas about morality and sin. With the instructions in Leviticus, the priests could lead Israel in worship appropriate to the Lord.

Even though the book contains a great deal of law, it is presented in a historical format. Immediately after Moses supervised the construction of the tabernacle, God came in glory to dwell there; this marked the close of the book of Exodus (40:34–38). Leviticus begins with God calling Moses from the tabernacle and ends with God's commands to Moses in the form of binding legislation. Israel's King had occupied His palace (the tabernacle), instituted His law, and declared Himself a covenant partner with His subjects.

No geographical movement occurs in this book. The people of Israel stay at the foot of Sinai, the mountain where God came down to give His law (25:1; 26:46; 27:34). They were still there one month later when the record of Numbers began (cf. Num. 1:1).

Historical and Theological Themes

The core ideas around which Leviticus develops are the holy character of God and the will of God for Israel's holiness. God's holiness, mankind's sinfulness, sacrifice, and God's presence in the sanctuary are the book's most common themes. With a clear, authoritative tone, the book sets forth instruction toward personal holiness at the urging of God (11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; cf. 1 Pet. 1:14–16). Matters pertaining to Israel's life of faith tend to focus on purity in ritual settings, but not to the exclusion of concerns regarding Israel's personal purity. In fact, there is a continuing emphasis on personal holiness in response to the holiness of God (cf. this emphasis in chaps. 17–27). On over 125 occasions, Leviticus indicts mankind for uncleanness and/or instructs on how to be purified. The motive for such holiness is stated in two repeated phrases: "I am the LORD" and "I am holy." These are used over 50 times.

The theme of the conditional Mosaic Covenant resurfaces throughout the book, but particularly in chap. 26. This contract for the new nation not only details the consequences for obedience or disobedience to the covenant stipulations, but it does so in a manner scripted for determining Israel's history. One cannot help but recognize prophetic implications in the punishments for disobedience; they sound like the events of the much later Babylonian deportment, captivity, and subsequent return to the land almost 900 years after Moses wrote Leviticus (ca. 538 B.C.). The eschatological

implications for Israel's disobedience will not conclude until Messiah comes to introduce His kingdom and end the curses of Lev. 26 and Deut. 28 (cf. Zech. 14:11).

The 5 sacrifices and offerings were symbolic. Their design was to allow the truly penitent and thankful worshiper to express faith in and love for God by the observance of these rituals. When the heart was not penitent and thankful, God was not pleased with the ritual. Cf. Amos 5:21–27. The offerings were burnt, symbolizing the worshiper's desire to be purged of sin and sending up the fragrant smoke of true worship to God. The myriad of small details in the execution of the rituals was to teach exactness and precision that would extend to the way the people obeyed the moral and spiritual laws of God and the way they revered every facet of His Word.

Interpretive Challenges

Leviticus is both a manual for the worship of God in Israel and a theology of Old Covenant ritual. Comprehensive understanding of the ceremonies, laws, and ritual details prescribed in the book is difficult today because Moses assumed a certain context of historical understanding. Once the challenge of understanding the detailed prescriptions has been met, the question arises as to how believers in the church should respond to them, since the NT clearly abrogates OT ceremonial law (cf. Acts 10:1–16; Col. 2:16, 17), the levitical priesthood (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6), and the sanctuary (cf. Matt. 27:51), as well as instituting the New Covenant (cf. Matt. 26:28; 2 Cor. 3:6–18; Heb. 7–10). Rather than try to practice the old ceremonies or look for some deeper spiritual significance in them, the focus should be on the holy and divine character behind them. This may partly be the reason that explanations which Moses often gave in the prescriptions for cleanness offer greater insight into the mind of God than do the ceremonies themselves. The spiritual principles in which the rituals were rooted are timeless because they are embedded in the nature of God. The NT makes it clear that from Pentecost forward (cf. Acts 2), the church is under the authority of the New Covenant, not the Old (cf. Heb. 7–10).

The interpreter is challenged to compare features of this book with NT writers who present types or analogies based on the tabernacle and the ceremonial aspects of the law, so as to teach valuable lessons about Christ and New Covenant reality. Though the ceremonial law served only as a shadow of the reality of Christ and His redemptive work (Heb. 10:1), excessive typology is to be rejected. Only that which NT writers identify as types of Christ should be so designated (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7, "Christ our Passover").

The most profitable study in Leviticus is that which yields truth in the understanding of sin, guilt, substitutionary death, and atonement by focusing on features which are not explained or illustrated elsewhere in OT Scripture. Later OT authors, and especially NT writers, build on the basic understanding of these matters provided in Leviticus. The sacrificial features of Leviticus point to their ultimate, one-time fulfillment in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:11–22).

1. LXX Septuagint—an ancient translation of the Old Testament into Greek

Outline

Leviticus 1–16 explains how to have personal access to God through appropriate worship and
Leviticus 17–27 details how to be spiritually acceptable to God through an obedient walk.

I. Laws Pertaining to Sacrifice (1:1–7:38)

A. Legislation for the Laity (1:1–6:7)

1. Burnt offerings (chap. 1)

2. Grain offerings (chap. 2)

3. Peace offerings (chap. 3)

4. Sin offerings (4:1–5:13)

5. Trespass offerings (5:14–6:7)

B. Legislation for the Priesthood (6:8–7:38)

1. Burnt offerings (6:8–13)

2. Grain offerings (6:14–23)

3. Sin offerings (6:24–30)

4. Trespass offerings (7:1–10)

5. Peace offerings (7:11–36)

6. Concluding remarks (7:37, 38)

II. Beginnings of the Priesthood (8:1–10:20)

A. Ordination of Aaron and His Sons (chap. 8)

B. First Sacrifices (chap. 9)

C. Execution of Nadab and Abihu (chap. 10)

III. Prescriptions for Uncleaness (11:1–16:34)

A. Unclean Animals (chap. 11)

B. Uncleaness of Childbirth (chap. 12)

C. Unclean Diseases (chap. 13)

D. Cleansing of Diseases (chap. 14)

E. Unclean Discharges (chap. 15)

F. Purification of the Tabernacle from Uncleaness (chap. 16)

IV. Guidelines for Practical Holiness (17:1–27:34)

A. Sacrifice and Food (chap. 17)

B. Proper Sexual Behavior (chap. 18)

C. Neighborliness (chap. 19)

D. Capital/Grave Crimes (chap. 20)

E. Instructions for Priests (chaps. 21, 22)

F. Religious Festivals (chap. 23)

G. The Tabernacle (24:1–9)

H. An Account of Blasphemy (24:10–23)

I. Sabbatical and Jubilee Years (chap. 25)

J. Exhortation to Obey the Law: Blessings and Curses (chap. 26)

K. Redemption of Votive Gifts (chap. 27)

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