



## Introduction to Leviticus

### Author, Date and Title

The authorship of Leviticus is closely related to the larger question of who wrote the Pentateuch. As discussed in the introductions to Genesis and Exodus, the Pentateuch itself clearly presents Moses as the mediator between the Lord and Israel at this point in Israel's history. Moreover, it also states explicitly that Moses wrote down at least some portions of the Pentateuch: <<***Then Moses wrote down this law, and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel***>> (Deuteronomy 31:9), and: <<***When Moses had finished writing down in a book the words of this law to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying, 'Take this book of the law and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God; let it remain there as a witness against you***>> (Deuteronomy 31:24). These factors indicate at the least that Moses is the primary source for the Pentateuch's material, and at the most that he is also its primary author. With regard to Leviticus in particular, the Lord is described as 'speaking to' Moses over 30 different times, and in many of these instances he then goes on to command Moses to 'speak' the words he has just heard to the Israelites, e.g. Leviticus 1:1-2, 4:1, 6:8-9, etc. This again indicates that Moses is the source of Leviticus, if not its author. This in turn suggests a date for the book in or near the time of Moses, which would be in the 15<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> Century BC, depending on when one dates the exodus. Refer to the date section in the Introduction of Exodus on the web site.

The Hebrew name for Leviticus, taken from the beginning of the book, is *wayyiqra*, meaning 'and he called'. The English name Leviticus can be traced back to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, in which the book is called *leyitikon*, meaning 'things concerning Levites'. This title may incorrectly suggest that the material of the book concerns only what priests do. As will become apparent, Leviticus is about much more than priestly duties.

## Theme

The Book of Leviticus is a further and deeper unfolding of the divine-human relationship codified on Mount Sinai. On the one hand, it assumes that Israel is sinful and impure. On the other hand, it describes how to deal with sin and impurity so that the holy Lord can dwell in the people's midst.

## Purpose

Leviticus should be considered a continuation of Exodus. The second part of Exodus is devoted to building the tabernacle (Exodus Chapters 25-40), the purpose of which is to manifest the Lord's glory among the people (Exodus 29:42-46 and Leviticus 9:23). The entire content of Leviticus was given less than a month after the construction of the tabernacle, between the first month of the year (Exodus 40:1, 40:34-35, and Leviticus 1:1), and the second month of the year (Numbers 1:1) following the exodus from Egypt.

## Interpretative Issues

Leviticus is a difficult book, mainly because modern readers have no firsthand experience of ancient rituals and the worship practices of the tabernacle. For this reason, readers should be aware of the potential pitfall of imposing concepts or distinctions that are foreign to the biblical text itself. With this general warning in mind, several particular interpretative issues may be mentioned.

*Ritual and ethical commands.* To begin, there is some debate about how to understand the relationship between the 'ritual' regulations of Chapters 1-16 and what are commonly called the 'moral/ethical' commands of Chapters 17-27. It is not uncommon for modern readers to see 'ritual' and 'ethics' as two very separate matters, and thus to view these two sections of the book as quite different and distinct. Leviticus, however, is more nuanced than that. While it may be true that not every 'ethical' law of Chapters 17-27 involves a ritual, it is not true that every 'ritual' law of Chapters 1-16 is disconnected from ethics. In fact, the whole of the book is concerned with Israel's being holy to the Lord, and the ritual laws of Chapters 1-16 are just as important in this regard as are the laws of Chapters 17-27. From the perspective of Leviticus, there is no such thing as a 'non-ethical' ritual law. As a result, it is unwise to see Chapters 1-16 and Chapters 17-27 as two unrelated sections of material. Both are equally concerned with Israel's holiness to the Lord.

*Unclean, clean, holy.* Leviticus also often uses the language of 'unclean', 'clean', and 'holy' differently than today. With 'unclean' and 'clean', for example, most modern readers are tempted to think of that which is 'non-hygienic' or 'hygienic'. In Leviticus, however, these words do not refer to hygiene at all. Rather, they refer to 'ritual states'. The word holy is also used in many contexts to describe a

ritual state. Understanding the concept of ritual states is very important to understanding Leviticus as a whole.

Leviticus sets forth three basic ritual states: the unclean, the clean, and the holy. On the one hand, these categories guide the community with reference to the types of actions a person may or may not engage in, or the places that a person may or may not go. Those who are unclean, e.g. may not partake of a peace offering (7:20), while those who are clean may (7:19). A modern analogy might be that of registering to vote: a person who is registered may vote, whereas a person who is not registered may not. There is a distinction to be made between 'ritual states' and 'moral states'. One who is in the ritual state of holiness is not necessarily more personally righteous than a person who is simply clean or unclean, just as a person who is registered to vote is not necessarily more righteous than a person who is not.

How ritual purity relates to moral purity. Even though ritual states and moral states are different, the ritual states also seemed to represent or symbolise grades of moral purity. The highest grade of moral purity was that of the Lord himself, who is holy and who dwelt in the 'Holy of Holies'. By constantly calling the Israelites to ritual purity in all aspects of life, the Lord was reminding them of their need for also seeking after moral purity in all aspects of life (20:24-26).

Interpreting the rituals and ceremonies. A further challenge in Leviticus is how to interpret the various rituals and ceremonies. In particular, how should the individual acts and objects that make up a ritual be understood? Answering this question can be difficult, for the simple reason that Leviticus rarely explains what various ritual actions or objects mean. One of the few exceptions is 17:11, where sacrificial animal blood is said to be the life of the animal. Some help is provided, however, by asking questions about the general function(s) and the specific function(s) of the ritual. Generally speaking, rituals may function in several ways: e.g. to address aspects of the human condition, such as impurity or sinfulness; to serve as a way for the offerer to express emotions or desires to the Lord; and to underscore various truths about the Lord or the human condition. In many instances, one ritual may accomplish all of these things. It is helpful to ask which of these general functions is in view in the ritual being considered. Related to this, one should also ask, 'What is the specific goal/function of this particular ritual as a whole?' Answering these two questions provides an interpretative framework in which to understand the individual actions of the ritual, in much the same way as a paragraph is an interpretative framework for the sentences in it. For example, if a ritual as a whole is meant to express an emotion (general), and more specifically to express praise (specific), then the individual actions or objects of the ritual should somehow contribute to this goal. Although this approach may still leave some questions unanswered, it will usually provide helpful guidelines and protect readers from some of the interpretative excesses of the past.

Another interpretative issue is how one should understand various concepts such as uncleanness, cleanness and holiness. Great debate accompanies this issue, for the simple reason that Leviticus often provides various laws concerning cleanness and uncleanness without giving an explicit rationale of why something or someone is clean or unclean, e.g. Chapter 12. Traditionally, commentators have thought that the rationale behind these rules was to be found in hygienic concerns, polemics against Canaanite religious customs, or the symbolic meaning of 'death'. Of these options, uncleanness as symbolic of death appears to be the only proposal that sufficiently covers many, as opposed to just some of the cases of uncleanness. If this is correct, then holiness – which is the polar opposite of uncleanness – could often symbolise life.

*NT relevance of commands in Leviticus.* What do these legislative texts of Leviticus have to do with the church today? At this point, only a broad picture may be presented, and it will be painted in three brushstrokes, merely offering examples of the value of Leviticus for the Christian believer. First, the sacrificial system of Leviticus has ceased for the people of God; it has been fulfilled in the coming of Christ, as confirmed in Hebrews 9:1-14, 9:24-28 and 10:1-14. Yet studying these laws is important because they enable the reader to understand how the work of Christ saves people, since the sacrifices point to different aspects of the meaning of Christ's sacrifice of himself.

Second, the festal calendar of Israel enumerated in Leviticus (Leviticus 23:1-44) has strongly shaped the Christian church's traditional calendar. The three main national pilgrim feasts of Israel are the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of Booths. For those churches that follow the traditional calendar, these celebrations find their climax in Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. To fully understand the Christian celebrations, one must see their initial purpose in the OT. At the same time, some aspects of the legislation in Leviticus, such as the laws regulating clean and unclean foods, had the goal of separating Israel from the other nations. Although this separation has been done away with in the Christian era, these laws still teach the people of God to be morally clean; refer to the comments on 11:1-47.

Third, the entire Levitical Holiness Code in Chapters 17-27 deals with sanctification, i.e. the idea of holiness affecting how one lives in the covenant community. The NT applies to Christians the same principle of life stated in Leviticus 11:44, 'be holy, for I am holy', which is quoted in 1 Peter 1:16. In fact, many of the moral requirements reflected in the Holiness Code reveal the kinds of moral conduct that are still either pleasing or displeasing to God, which is confirmed for example in Leviticus 19:11-18 and 19:35-36. On the other hand, several details of the Holiness Code concern more symbolic aspects of holiness that should no longer be followed in the Christian era, such as laws prohibiting garments of two kinds of cloth (19:19); prohibiting the shaving of the edges of

one's beard (21:5); and excluding people with physical defects from presenting offerings (21:17-23). Further, the NT envisions a people of God that transcends national boundaries, and thus it dissolves the bond between the specifically theocratic system of government that was OT Israel. Therefore, current civil governments need not replicate the civil laws specific to the Mosaic theocracy, such as capital punishment for adultery in 20:10 or for blasphemy in 24:16, or the Sabbath year and Jubilee year in 25:1-22, although of course all governments must pursue justice, and Leviticus may certainly help Christians develop their notions of justice.

### Key Themes

1. The holy Lord is present in the midst of his people (Exodus 40:34 and Leviticus 1:1). The people of Israel must therefore properly address their sin and impurity and must strive for personal holiness.
2. In order to approach God, worshipers must be wholehearted in their devotion (1:1-6:7 and 22:17-30).
3. Those who are called to be spiritual leaders, such as priests, bear a heavier responsibility than do the laypeople (Chapters 4 and 21). In addition to the outward holiness that the priests are granted when ordained, they are constantly commanded to maintain inner holiness (Chapters 8-10 and 21).
4. As seen in the Day of Atonement ritual (Chapter 16), the total cleansing of sins and uncleanness is done when the innermost part of the tent of meeting is purified. Ultimate purification of uncleanness is impossible from the human side.
5. Atonement is a gracious act of the Lord by which sins and impurities can be dealt with (17:11).

### History of Salvation Summary

The Book of Leviticus is concerned with what it means to be the holy people of a holy God: it provides instruction for conduct, both in private and as members of the body of God's people, and it details the ways in which the sacrifices and priesthood are to be administered as God's gracious provision for his people's failures. Without doubt, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the culmination of salvation history, according to which he fulfilled the goals of the various offerings, the holy objects, the role of the chief priest, and the holy feasts. He also, by his resurrection, entered into his Davidic kingship and has initiated the era in which the people of God include the Gentiles and are no longer defined as a nation-state. Because of this, Christ's atoning work made obsolete the literal observance of not only the animal sacrifices and offerings, but also the temple worship as a whole.

However, as long as believers continue to bear their sinful nature, which they do until they die, the atoning grace of Christ does not make Leviticus irrelevant to NT believers, since principles can still be learned from the underlying laws in this book. In fact, NT writers such as the apostles Paul and Peter employ language taken from Leviticus in their exhortations to believers to follow Christ, e.g. offerings, the tabernacle, priesthood, and feasts. NT authors use the burnt offering (1 Peter 1:19); sin offering, e.g. Romans 8:3, Hebrews 5:3 and 13:11, 1 Peter 3:18, 1 John 2:2 and 4:10; guilt offering, possibly 1 Corinthians 15:3, using Isaiah 53:10, to explain what Jesus accomplished on the Cross; and the peace offering, to explain the Christian Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 10:16-18). Thus, the Book of Leviticus serves as a constant reminder of the person and work of Jesus Christ and challenges believers to apply his Gospel.

### Literary Features

Although on the surface Leviticus is a handbook of laws and regulations, it is actually much more than this. Composed as Israel was preparing to become a settled nation in a promised land, the book has affinities with utopian literature. Literary utopias both describe how people live in an ideal society, and also offer an explanation of the institutions and practices that produce the society that is pictured. Leviticus outlines how people should live in God's ideal commonwealth, explaining the practices, i.e. the rules and regulations that God commands, and the institutional scaffolding, that is, the Levitical priesthood, that produce God's intended good society. Additional genres include manual for worship, law code, community health regulations, liturgical calendar, and narrative.

The primary rhetorical form of Leviticus is oracular directive from a divine Lawgiver – a series of commands that come from the authoritative voice of God. The commands are addressed by God to Moses, with the formula 'and the Lord spoke to Moses' repeated over 30 times. It thus becomes clear that Leviticus is meant to be received as the very words of the Lord that are intended to direct his covenant people in holy living.

Literary realism is present in the form of a total lack of inhibition in discussing such matters as the slaughter of animals, human diseases, bodily functions, and sexual behaviour. A good reading strategy is to imagine stories and human experiences of people living within the system – experiences such as the terror of discovering some type of contamination in one's home and having to report it to the priests and perhaps dismantle the house (14:33-47).

## The Setting of Leviticus (circa 1446/1260BC)

The Book of Exodus finishes with Moses and Israel having constructed and assembled the tabernacle at the base of Mount Sinai. The Book of Leviticus primarily records the instructions the Lord gives to Moses from the tent of meeting, but also includes narrative of a few events related to the tabernacle.



## Outline

- I. Five Major Offerings (1:1-6:7)
  - a. The Burnt-Offering (1:1-17)
  - b. Grain-Offerings (2:1-16)
  - c. Offerings of Well-Being (3:1-17)
  - d. Sin-Offerings (4:1-5:13)
  - e. Offerings with Restitution (5:14-6:7)

- II. Handling of the Offerings (6:8-7:38)
  - a. Instructions concerning Sacrifices (6:8-7:10)
  - b. Further Instructions (7:11-38)
- III. The Establishment of the Priesthood (8:1-10:20)
  - a. The Rites of Ordination (8:1-36)
  - b. Aaron's Priesthood Inaugurated (9:1-24)
  - c. Nadab and Abihu (10:1-20)
- IV. The Laws on Cleanness and Uncleanness (11:1-15:33)
  - a. Clean and Unclean Foods (11:1-23)
  - b. Unclean Animals (11:24-47)
  - c. Purification of Women after Childbirth (12:1-8)
  - d. Leprous Diseases and Their Purification (13:1-14:57)
    - i. Leprosy: Varieties and Symptoms (13:1-59)
    - ii. Purification of Lepers and Leprous Houses (14:1-57)
      - A. Laws for Cleansing Lepers (14:1-32)
      - B. (Laws for Cleansing Houses) (14:33-57)
  - e. Concerning Bodily Discharges (15:1-33)
- V. The Day of Atonement (16:1-34)
- VI. The Handling and Meaning of Blood (17:1-16)
  - a. The Slaughtering of Animals (17:1-9)
  - b. Eating Blood Prohibited (17:10-16)
- VII. The Call to Holiness (18:1-22:33)
  - a. Sexual Relations (18:1-30)
  - b. Ritual and Moral Holiness (19:1-37)
  - c. Penalties for Violations of Holiness (20:1-27)
  - d. The Holiness of Priests (21:1-24)
  - e. Holiness of the offerings (22:1-33)
    - i. The Use of Holy Offerings (22:1-16)
    - ii. Acceptable Offerings (22:17-33)
- VIII. Holy Times (23:1-25:55)
  - a. Holy feasts (23:1-44)
    - i. Appointed Festivals (23:1-2)
    - ii. The Sabbath, Passover, and Unleavened Bread (23:3-8)
    - iii. The Offering of First Fruits (23:9-14)
    - iv. The Festival of Weeks (23:15-22)

- v. The Festival of Trumpets (23:23-25)
  - vi. The Day of Atonement (23:26-32)
  - vii. The Festival of Booths (23:33-44)
- b. The Lamp (24:1-4)
- c. The Bread for the Tabernacle (24:5-9)
- d. Blasphemy and Its Punishment (24:10-23)
- e. The Sabbatical Year (25:1-7)
- f. The Year of Jubilee (25:8-55)
- IX. Blessings and Curses (26:1-46)
  - a. Rewards for Obedience (26:1-13)
  - b. Penalties for Disobedience (26:14-46)
- X. Votive Offerings (27:1-34)
  - a. The Case of Persons (27:1-8)
  - b. The Case of Animals (27:9-13)
  - c. The Case of a House (27:14-15)
  - d. The Case of Land (27:16-25)
  - e. The Case of the Firstborn (27:26-27)
  - f. The Case of Devoted Things (27:28-29)
  - g. The Case of Tithes (27:30-33)
  - h. Postscript (27:34)