



Summary of Leviticus

Introduction

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'. It is generally accepted to have been written by Moses during the forty year journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the Holy Land.

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.

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.

Chapter One

The burnt-offering is the most costly offering there is, since it is completely burned up with nothing left except for the skin, which the priest kept. The motive for offering the burnt-offering is assumed, not specified, but other references to the sacrifices show that it is offered on such occasions as thanksgiving, penitence, vows, and self-dedication. Instead of focusing on the motive, this text focuses on more fundamental aspects of the sacrifices, such as the symbolism of the shedding of blood and the burning.

The mention of 'a pleasing odour' implies that the sacrifice results in the Lord's favour toward the one offering the sacrifice. This could happen in sin contexts, such as Noah's offering of burnt-offerings after the flood to appease the wrath of

God that was still present after he had destroyed so many of his creatures (Genesis 8:20). This could also happen in praise or thanksgiving contexts, such as the psalmist's presentation of costly and pleasing burnt-offerings as acts of praise for the Lord's deliverance (Psalm 66:13-15). One is also reminded by this sacrifice of Paul's exhortation to Christians to present their bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord (Romans 12:1).

In Leviticus Chapter One, three options are provided regarding the material of the sacrifice, a bull, small livestock such as a sheep or a goat, and a bird, but all were to be from the offerer's own prior possession and were to be from his best stock, without blemish.

Chapter Two

Grain-offerings typically consisted of four elements: (1) choice flour; (2) oil; (3) frankincense; and (4) salt. They could be brought either uncooked or cooked. The priest would not burn the entire offering but only a handful as a token portion. The grain-offering would ordinarily be offered with a burnt-offering or an offering of well-being, and probably served the same purpose as the offering it accompanied, whether for petition or for praise.

Chapter Three

This offering achieves and expresses peace or fellowship between an offerer and the Lord. The ritual as a whole symbolises a communion meal that is held between the offerer, the officiating priest, and the Lord. In OT times such meals were a means of affirming a covenant relationship, as seen in the account of Isaac and Abimelech: <<They said, 'We see plainly that the Lord has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you so that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord.' So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank>> (Genesis 26:28-30).

Generally speaking, then, this offering was a time to remember and reaffirm the covenant relationship between the Lord and Israel, as confirmed by Paul: <<***The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar?>>*** (1 Corinthians 10:16-18), and: <<***For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'*** In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new

covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes>> (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

As with the burnt-offering, there are various specific motives for the offering of well-being, ranging from petition to praise. In this chapter, though, the entire emphasis is on the procedure for the offering, with a special focus on the burning of the fat.

Chapter Four

This chapter prescribes how to deal with the sins of the anointed priest and the whole congregation. Blood is sprinkled in front of the veil that separates the outer and inner parts of the tabernacle, indicating that their sins have defiled the Most Holy Place. However, since this is a regular occasion, and not the Day of Atonement ritual as described in Chapter 16, the blood cannot be brought into the Most Holy Place. The ritual here shows that the priest and congregation as a corporate entity bear heavier responsibility before the Lord than an individual leader or layperson, so that a more costly animal is required for them to make atonement for their sins.

The priest atones for the sin of a leader or an individual by what he does with the blood at the altar of the burnt-offering and by burning the fat on it. The meat is not burned outside the camp, since it will be eaten by the priests.

Chapter Five

The chapter commences with a list of situations describing both deliberate and unintentional acts that are deemed to be sinful. Whatever the circumstances, the person is to repent of their sin immediately they become aware of it and are to make a sin offering through the priest. Those unable to afford to offer an ox or a sheep can make the same offering using less expensive turtledoves or pigeons. If even they are beyond the means of the sinner then an offering of choice flour can be made as an acceptable substitute. The chapter concludes with required process for a guilt-offering, which is either a ram or the equivalent value in silver.

Chapter Six

The case in vv.1-7 indicates the necessity of making reparation both to the damaged neighbour and to the Lord, and that when a person is seeking the Lord's forgiveness, he must also correct the wrong committed against his neighbour.

Verses 8-13 are concerned with the continual burnt-offerings that were made every morning and every evening (Exodus 29:38-42). Verses 14-23 focuses on what the priests are required to do with the grain-offering, with vv.24-30 describing what they must do with the grain-offering.

Chapter Seven

The earlier passage (5:14-6:7) focused on when the guilt-offering was to be offered; vv.1-10 now focus on how it is to be offered. This is followed by further instructions with regard to the sin-offering and the chapter concludes with a summary of all the offerings described in 6:8-7:36.

Chapter Eight

This chapter describes the rite of priestly ordination as a fulfilment of the commands given in Exodus Chapters 28-29. It is a highly structured narrative divided into seven parts by the phrase 'as the Lord commanded'. The number seven often symbolises completion in the OT, and in this chapter the sevenfold layout signifies that, by the end, the installation of the priests is fully achieved.

Chapter Nine

This chapter prescribes and describes the first tabernacle service after the ordination of Aaron and his sons. The requirement of various offerings assumes that both the priests and the people are sinful. The Lord manifests himself by miraculously burning the animals on the altar, thus indicating that he has accepted both the priests and the people. This chapter functions as a sequel to the Sinai event; just as God came down to deliver his covenant to his people, so now he descends upon his altar to dwell intimately with them.

Chapter Ten

The Lord's acceptance of Aaron's offering in Chapter 9 is followed, on the same day, by an apparent rejection of it, and joy gives way to sorrow.

Chapter Eleven

This chapter explains which creatures were considered clean and which were considered unclean. The rationale of why a creature is placed in one category vs. the other has puzzled commentators throughout the ages, and there is still no consensus of opinion. Typical explanations include a concern for hygiene; a death motif, i.e. unclean animals were somehow more associated with death in the Israelite mind; and polemics against Canaanite customs. More recently, it has been argued that a creature is unclean when it does not conform to established norms, e.g. an Israelite's established norm for a four-legged creature would be a cow or a goat, since these were their herd and flock animals; a pig is thus unclean because, even though it has four legs, it is unlike the norm in that it does not chew the cud.

In evaluating the above approaches, it is probably fair to say that no single one of them can provide a rationale that works for all the animals in this chapter. As a result, there might be a number of different reasons why an animal was considered clean or unclean. While the rationale of the classifications is still debated, the

purpose of these laws is clear. In brief, they were to help Israel, as the Lord's holy people, to make distinctions between ritual cleanness and ritual uncleanness. Significantly, making these distinctions in the ritual realm would no doubt serve as a constant reminder to the people of their need for making the parallel distinctions in the moral realm as well. Further, adherence to these food laws expresses Israel's devotion to the Lord: just as he separated the Israelites from the other nations, so they must separate clean from unclean foods (20:24-26). This is why the restrictions can be removed in Acts 10:9-28, when the Jew vs. Gentile distinction is no longer relevant in defining the people of God, as confirmed by also Mark 7:19, Colossians 2:16-23, Hebrews 9:1-14, and 10:1-18.

For Israel to obey these dietary restrictions also shows that the people honour their creator, who has the right to decide how his creatures may be used. A clean animal is one permitted for food. It is clear that classifying an animal as unclean is not the same as declaring that animal as evil: God cares for all beasts, clean and unclean alike, as confirmed by Psalm 104:17-18 and 147:9.

Leviticus employs a simple and practical classification system for edible animals, based on readily observable features. It is geared to the kind of life that Israel will live in the land of Canaan, and it is not always easy to apply it to animals that Israelites did not normally encounter; for instance, the sturgeon, which modern rabbis consider to have the wrong kind of scales, is not included here. This system is good for its purpose, a purpose that is different from that of the modern zoologist's taxonomy.

Chapter Twelve

A woman who has just given birth is considered unclean. The loss of blood signifies that one is incomplete and unclean. Three steps are required to move from defilement to purity:

1. The woman is to remain unclean for seven or fourteen days, depending on the gender of the child.
2. She then moves into the second stage, which lasts for thirty-three to sixty-six days in which she is neither pure nor impure.
3. Finally, she offers sacrifices in order to enter into full communion with the covenant people.

The time of purification for the mother is twice as long if she gives birth to a female rather than a male. The reason is uncertain, although it may be that the female is potentially more unclean because of the probability of her menstruating and of her giving birth. Also, the male child is circumcised on the eighth day, identifying him as belonging to God. In any event, there is no implication that the reason for the distinction is any kind of presumed inferiority of women.

Chapter Thirteen

This chapter deals with uncleanness brought about by leprosy. The NRSVA adopts the traditional rendering leprosy for the Hebrew *tsara'at*, but its exact modern equivalent is unclear, particularly in view of the fact that it manifests itself not only in humans but also in clothes and articles (vv.47-59), and even in the walls of houses (14:34-53). The term used in Leviticus is in fact generic: it could include many skin ailments, such as psoriasis, urticaria (hives), favus (which produces honeycomb-shaped crusts), and leukoderma (which produces white patches on the skin). What today is called leprosy, i.e. Hansen's disease, was unknown in the Near East at the time of Leviticus. Clear references to it do not occur until the late first millennium BC.

Chapter Fourteen

This chapter gives the prescribed purificatory rite for the person healed of a specific skin disease called *tsara'at* (vv.1-32) along with the purificatory rite for an afflicted house (vv.33-53).

Chapter Fifteen

The rules in this chapter are symmetrically structured:

- A serious case of male discharge (vv.2-15).
- Man's emission of semen (vv.16-17).
- Sexual intercourse (v.18).
- Female menstruation (vv.19-24).
- A serious case of female discharge (vv.25-30).

One characteristic of these regulations is their emphasis on the transmission of contagion from one person to another. Transmission of infection may occur in any number of ways; for example: by sitting on an object that a defiled person had previously sat on, by touching contaminated cooking utensils, and by having direct contact through touching or spitting. No matter how it happens, the person infected is required to separate from their community and to undergo the purification ritual.

It is clear that unclean is not the same as sinful, but rather has to do with what is permitted. The Bible does not view the process of reproduction, with its associated bodily functions, as evil; this is part of the original good creation, even though human nature is severely damaged by the fall of Adam. Certainly the Creator of these functions has the right to tell his obedient creatures how and when to use them.

Chapter Sixteen

Occasioned by the death of Nadab and Abihu, which is recorded in Chapter 10, the prescription sets out how, and for what purpose, Aaron the high priest is to enter the Most Holy Place. The account ends with the institutionalisation of the ritual. The nature of the ritual shows that purification for sins and uncleanness must be done from the innermost part of the tabernacle. All the other purificatory rituals hinge on the ceremony of this day. The sin-offerings in this chapter in particular point to the work of Christ on the Cross.

Chapter Seventeen

This chapter deals with the handling of animals, beginning with a reminder that the blood of slain animals should be brought to the sanctuary. As the chapter progresses, deeper rationales for the instructions are gradually revealed: they are intended to prevent ongoing idolatry, and the blood of a sacrificial animal is the 'life' that takes the place of the offerer's death. Animal blood is not to be used by Israel indiscriminately as it was used among the pagans of the time.

Chapter Eighteen

The rules from Chapter 18 onwards aim to lead the people to holiness. Although the term holy or holiness is not mentioned in Chapter 18, avoiding such conduct as practiced in Egypt and particularly in Canaan is the minimal requirement for the people to become holy. In reading the laws, it is important to see both their original context and their underlying and abiding principles. From the latter viewpoint, the laws in this chapter can be seen as commanding the people to avoid any action that ignores the order that God revealed in his creation. In this sense, the prohibited acts in this chapter are representative examples, i.e. they are non-exhaustive.

Chapter Nineteen

In this chapter the Lord strongly commands the people, including the priests, to become holy in their practice, as he is holy. One becomes practically holy by observing all the following negative and positive commandments. Some of the commandments in vv.3-18 are similar to the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20:2-17, and the topics in this chapter show that holiness must be practiced in every sphere of one's life. Some of the rules are grounded in the fact that the Lord is the one who saved the Israelites from the bondage in Egypt. Many of these rules, e.g. vv.9-18, are oriented toward the Israelites' functioning as a loving community, serving one another's well-being.

Chapter Twenty

The rules in this chapter have much in common with those in Chapter 18. This chapter, however, sets forth and stresses the punishments for violating the rules.

Special emphasis is laid on Molech worship and mediums and wizards. Almost all the crimes listed are punishable by the death penalty. Only a few are to receive a lesser sentence, such as in vv.17-18, in which the perpetrator is excommunicated.

Chapter Twenty One

Chapters 21-22 deal with the Lord's demand of holiness for the priests and the offerings. While priests have been ordained and are holy in terms of their office, that holiness is only an outward one; it does not necessarily mean that they have inner holiness of heart and conduct. More stringent regulations of holiness are required of the priests because they work directly with the holy objects of the sanctuary.

Chapter Twenty Two

This chapter aims at guaranteeing the holiness of offerings, particularly against those who handle them, i.e. the priests and lay offerers. The offerings, just like the priest, ought to be physically without blemish.

Chapter Twenty Three

This chapter is a systematic presentation of the festal calendar in Israel, as confirmed by Exodus 23:10-19 and 34:18-26, Numbers Chapters 28-29 and Deuteronomy 16:1-17. It is based on three national pilgrim festivals: the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks, and the Festival of Booths. The foundation of these three festivals is the Sabbath. Keeping this calendar sets Israel apart from all the surrounding nations.

Chapter Twenty Four

The placement of the text concerning the lamp and the bread of the presence in the tabernacle directly after a discussion of the Israelite festal calendar appears peculiar. However, its placement here may be to remind the Israelites not to forget the daily tabernacle activities in light of the annual festivals discussed in Chapter 23.

The command against blaspheming God's name has already been given in Exodus 20:7 and 22:28. It is dealt with again in the present passage for two reasons: firstly, no penalty for it was provided in the previous prohibitions; secondly, the one who blasphemes in this case is not a full-fledged Israelite. The man is placed under temporary guard until judgement is passed.

The chapter concludes with the principle of *lex talionis*, which is Latin for 'the law of retribution', a concept that has formed the basis of law in many free countries and is still carried out literally in some cultures.

Chapter Twenty Five

Verses 1-22 are a sequel to Chapter 23, which primarily dealt with the Hebrew festal calendar. Added to that calendar are these two celebrations based on the Sabbath principle, i.e. one in seven. Israel is required to keep these holy times as a symbol that they are a holy people. The remainder of the chapter deals with the concept of redemption. If a person gets into difficulty or danger, then a relative, his 'kinsman-redeemer,' is to redeem him from his dire straits. The various methods of redemption are explained.

Chapter Twenty Six

A principal element of a covenant document is a section of sanctions, i.e. blessings and curses that are dependent on how one keeps the covenant agreement. Often they appear at the close of a covenant document, and there they enumerate the sovereign's granting of rewards or punishments based on the vassal's obedience or disobedience. Verses 1-13 display the blessings if Israel obeys the covenant; vv.14-39 pronounce curses.

Chapter Twenty Seven

This final chapter of Leviticus sets out the means of redemption as it relates to vows made to the Lord and his sanctuary. The material appears to be an appendix or addendum to the book; it does not fit smoothly with the content of the previous Holiness Code. This does not mean that the chapter was added at a later time, but it was placed here at the end to underscore the importance of funding the sanctuary.