

Leviticus

This is what the LORD spoke:
“By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy;
And before all the people I must be glorified”(Lev 10:3)

It is one thing to take a homeless waif off of the streets, put a roof over his head, set him at a table from which to eat, and give him a bed to sleep in, and quite another thing to see that he behaves in respect to his benefactor as a son who is like his father in character, word, and deed. Israel had been rescued in the Exodus and constituted as God’s special son-nation at Sinai. Yet for such a magnificent display of grace they were prone to act as though they still lived in Egypt. Leviticus fills in the broad outline of covenant nationhood laid down in the Book of Exodus with the details of how a sinful people could live in fellowship with a Holy God and thereby give evidence of His person and purposes to the rest of the world. Though enigmatic to modern man, when Israel’s rules, regulations, and procedures of holiness are set against the background of ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties the interpreter is better able to appreciate their contribution to the two main thrusts of the book, fellowship and testimony.

Authorship

The question of the authorship of Leviticus is inseparable from the issue of the origin and composition of the Pentateuch as a whole. Though these five books nowhere state that Moses was their author, Jewish and Christian tradition holds this to be so on the basis of numerous and specific textual references. Moses’ writing activity is referred to both within and outside the Torah. He was to record certain events (Exod 17:14; Num 33:2) and laws (Exod 24:4; 34:27); he wrote a song (Deut 31:22). Since Moses received God’s revelation of the Law and it found its way onto a scroll, it stands to reason that he was responsible for it. Joshua associates the Book of the Law with that which was commanded by Moses (Josh 1:7-8). Later on the Israelites referred to the “Book of Moses” with reference to certain regulations and procedures (2 Chr 25:4; Ezra 6:18; Neh 13:1). In addition, Jesus and the early church attributed the Law to Moses (Matt 19:7; 22:24; Mark 7:10; 12:26; John 1:17; 5:45; 7:23). Though there are a number of insertions and additions, especially in the later books of the Pentateuch, which post-date Moses (e.g. the report of his death and certain explanatory remarks) these are not sufficient to deny the “essential authorship” of Moses.¹ The unity of the Pentateuch is another powerful argument for a single

¹ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 40.

authorial hand, notwithstanding the co-authorship of the Holy Spirit.² Modern theories that deny Mosaic authorship fail to give an adequate basis for discovering the meaning of the text.³

Date

On the basis of the traditional dating of the Exodus at 1446 B.C., and the assumption that Leviticus was written by Moses as part of the Pentateuch, it would have been completed no later than 1406 B.C., the date of his death. It may well have been completed by the beginning of the wilderness wanderings, that is, 1444 B.C.

Historical Setting

Though Leviticus is largely instruction, the narrative portions that are included (chs. 8–10; 24) take place during Israel's two-year sojourn at Mount Sinai. The material included is supplemental to the establishment and function of covenant nationhood as laid out in the Book of Exodus.

Original Readers / Occasion

Since Leviticus directs in the way of fellowship for the nation, it must be assumed that the first generation would have been instructed in the basics included therein. However, the canonical work was intended for the second generation as they prepared to enter the Promised Land, as part of the covenant made with their parents.

Special Issues

Relationship to Exodus and Numbers. Leviticus is anything but an extraneous law code of late origin. Exodus details the establishment of the covenant relationship and concludes with the construction of the tent of meeting whereby Yahweh and His people could meet. Leviticus is the next logical development of that beginning. It answers the question How can a sinful person, and a nation made up of sinful people, live in fellowship with the Holy God? Hence, it gives the *modus operandi* of the Sinaitic covenant and provides an explanation for why the first generation of Israel fell in the wilderness.

The Sacrificial System. A proper understand of Leviticus corrects two errors with respect to thinking about sacrifice. First, Israel's sacrificial system was not designed to gain God's favor.

² For a recent structural display of the unity of the Pentateuch see David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 47-102. See also John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992).

³ For a discussion of these theories see Herbert Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 60-78 and Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 40-48.

The nation had already been redeemed by grace and constituted as Yahweh's firstborn son (cf. Exod 4:22). What was necessary was a way to maintain fellowship within that previously established relationship. The sacrifices did this by providing an atoning covering for sin through blood and by giving the worshipper a way to present an acceptable offering of devotion to God. Secondly, Israel's sacrificial system was not like that of the surrounding nations, which served to appease their gods and manipulate them into otherwise unexpected benevolence. Israel was unique in its creation, destiny, and experience with respect to their God.

Theme Statement

Only as Israel approached their Holy God through appropriate sacrifice would they be able to personally enjoy the fellowship of His presence and corporately bear appropriate testimony to Him among the nations.

Outline

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Theme Statement

Only as Israel approached their Holy God through appropriate sacrifice would they be able to personally enjoy the fellowship of His presence and corporately bear appropriate testimony to Him among the nations.

Theme Development

Leviticus is about fellowship and testimony, not salvation. Israel was already a redeemed people when they received Torah at Mount Sinai. Their covenant mandate was to be a holy nation as a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:4-6). Thus, they needed to know how to live in fellowship with their holy Redeemer and they needed guidance in appropriate expressions of that relationship for the benefit of the nations who would observe their behavior. While there is some overlap of these motifs, the book emphasizes holiness as it pertains to personal fellowship in the first part (1:1–15:33) and corporate holiness as it pertains to outward testimony in the second part (16:1–26:34).

I. Holiness and Personal Fellowship: The people are instructed in the holiness necessary to maintain personal fellowship with Yahweh (1:1–15:33).

The title “Leviticus” is somewhat misleading since the instructions herein are to all “the children of Israel” (1:2) not just the levitical priesthood, though they are much in view since it fell to them to instruct and oversee the function of Israel’s religious life. This section focuses on the individual (“When any one of you brings an offering . . .”—1:2) and the priesthood in its responsibility for facilitating the individual’s approach.

A. The foundations for personal fellowship are laid down in the offerings of approach to a Holy God (1:1–7:38).

The covenant invited the Israelite into Yahweh’s presence but not without an appropriate offering (1:1–6:7).⁴ The whole burnt offering was the commonest of the Old Testament sacrifices

⁴ Cf. Eugene H. Merrill, “A Theology of the Pentateuch,” *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, Roy B. Zuck, ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 57.

and combined the ideas of atonement for man's sin in general and the offering of something costly as a token of devoted servanthood (1:1-17).⁵ Likewise, the cereal offering signified the worshipper's obedience and devotion but without the aspect of atonement, which is why it usually followed the burnt offering (2:1-16). It also provided food for the priesthood. The peace offering (3:1-17), which concluded with a shared meal, celebrated the worshipper's fellowship with his covenant Lord; they "constituted an expression of thanksgiving by the vassal for a state of fellowship that currently existed. They were freewill, nonobligatory testimonies to a heart filled with thanksgiving and praise for the goodness of the Lord."⁶ While the burnt offering covered man's innate sinfulness, there was need for repairing breaches of fellowship that resulted from specific acts of transgression. The sin offering (4:1-5:13) atoned for specific infractions of the covenant that were unintentional, that is, without rebellious forethought. There were specific procedures for the common person (4:2-12), the whole congregation (4:13-21), and a ruler (4:22-26). The trespass offering, like the sin offering, atoned for specific sins but included as well restitution to the offended party, whether it be God alone (4:15-19) or also involved another person (6:1-7). By means of these offerings the individual's fellowship with the Lord, and by extension with his fellow Israelite, could be maintained, enjoyed, and, when broken, restored.

Given the obvious importance of these various offerings it was incumbent upon the priesthood to guide the worshippers accurately when they came before the Lord. For that reason the next section gives specific instructions to the priests for handling the sacrifices, including the share that they were to have as special servants of the covenant (6:8-7:38).

B. The nation initiated into the fellowship of the worship of the Holy God (8:1-15:33).

This narrative section shows that Leviticus is not merely a law code, but part of the extended account of the formation of the covenant people and their movement toward the

⁵ Wenham summarizes: "The burnt offering was the commonest of all the OT sacrifices. Its main function was to atone for man's sin by propitiating God's wrath. In the immolation of the animal, most commonly a lamb, God's judgment against human sin was symbolized and the animal suffered in man's place. The worshipper acknowledged his guilt and responsibility for his sins by pressing his hand on the animal's head and confessing his sin. The lamb was accepted as the ransom price for the guilty man. The daily use of the sacrifice in the worship of the temple and tabernacle was a constant reminder of man's sinfulness and God's holiness. So were its occasional usages after sickness, childbirth, and vows. In bringing a sacrifice a man acknowledged his sinfulness and guilt. He also publicly confessed his faith in the Lord, his thankfulness for past blessing, and his resolve to live according to God's holy will all the days of his life." Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 63. For a full discussion of the burnt offering see *ibid.*, 48-66.

⁶ Merrill, "Theology of the Pentateuch," 57.

Promised Land, stretching from Exodus through Deuteronomy. The making of the garments for the priesthood had been described in Exodus. Now that the procedures and laws of the sacrifices have been specified the priesthood is consecrated and installed in their service before the whole congregation (8:1-36). The nation is led in acceptable worship by the newly ordained priesthood as evidenced by the appearance of the Shekinah to all the people and the consuming of the offering by fire from His presence (9:1-24). Yahweh was dwelling in the midst of His people clothed in holiness.

Presumptuous and improper worship on the part of the priests Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, brings immediate judgment as a warning that priest and people must take seriously their approach to the Lord (10:1-7). Having gained their attention, Yahweh instructs priest and people in their responsibilities. The chief concern of the priests is to be the discernment between what is holy and unholy, unclean and clean, so that they may teach the children of Israel (10:1-11). As they do this they will be provided for according to the laws of the offerings (10:12-15). The concern of the people is to be personal holiness through observance of the distinctions between what is clean and unclean. This leads to a major section that reveals the internal purpose of the levitical observations.

Israel had become a holy nation, that is, a uniquely created people set apart to the exclusive use of their Creator. For this reason, Israel's "lifestyle and, indeed, her very character must advertise to all peoples the meaning of that identity and mission."⁷ Yahweh was holy, that is complete and whole within Himself, free from any competing or defiling thing, pure. Since the various restrictions and prescriptions regarding clean and unclean things do not in most cases seem to have anything to do with inherent corruption they must be viewed with respect to what they can teach about the Lord and one's relationship to Him.⁸ Because Israel was to live as the people of their Creator, they would have constant reminders about His wholeness,

⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁸ Merrill calls these regulations "pedagogical reference points" explaining that "a people (such as Israel) is holy because of Yahweh's elective and saving decrees. All else is holy or unholy by virtue of divine deliberation and mandate. It is not so by nature but becomes so by the will of God." (Ibid.). Wenham, following the lead of Mary Douglas, develops the idea of holiness as entailing wholeness and completeness suggesting that "cleanness is the natural state of most creatures. Holiness is a state of grace to which men are called by God, and it is attained through obeying the law and carrying out rituals of sacrifice. Uncleanliness is a substandard condition to which men descend through bodily processes and sin. Every Israelite had a duty to seek release from uncleanliness through washing and sacrifice, because uncleanliness was quite incompatible with the holiness of the covenant people." (Wenham, *Leviticus*, 23) For a thorough discussion of clean and unclean see *ibid.*, 161-224.

completeness, and purity as they gave attention to things to be eaten and touched (11:1-47), to purification after childbirth (12:1-8), to conditions of the skin and other surfaces (13:1-14:47), and to bodily discharges (15:1-33). Whether or not these regulations were arbitrary, it is clear that the demands of holiness were exacting, centered in concern for defilement of Yahweh's tabernacle (15:31).

II. Holiness and Corporate Testimony: The people are instructed in holiness as it reveals Yahweh to the surrounding nations (16:1-27:34).

Instruction on the Day of Atonement relates to both emphases of the book, personal fellowship and corporate testimony. Given the far-reaching and exacting nature of the demands of holiness just enumerated (11:1-15:33) it was inevitable that the sanctuary would become defiled, through ignorance if not willful disobedience. However, we have moved to a corporate aspect of fellowship, which the repeated emphasis on the nation and the nations makes clear.

A. The provision for corporate forgiveness - Day of Atonement (16:1-34).

In light of the inevitability of defiling the sanctuary, the Day of Atonement provides for a yearly purification of Yahweh's dwelling place so that He might continue to live among His people and thus reveal Himself to the nations. The ritual involved elaborate preparation and careful execution by the high priest, who, having made atonement for himself, then acted on behalf of the whole nation. It included a sin offering and a scapegoat (16:3-10). For the people it was a "sabbath of solemn rest" and necessitated affliction of soul (16:31). This corporate activity sets the stage for instruction as to how Israel would give testimony to the rest of the nations.⁹

B. Israel is instructed in the ways of being a distinctive people according to station in life (17:1-22:33).

Through the prohibition against eating blood, for Israelite and foreigner alike, Israel will have opportunity to demonstrate something of the unique nature of animate life (17:1-14). Likewise, rules for washing after eating beasts found dead apply to native and stranger (17:15-16). Laws on sexual morality are introduced by specific contrast to the ways of Egypt and Canaan (18:1-30; see esp. 18:1-5, 24-30). Laws of personal morality and cultic purity (19:1-37) have a great deal to do with interpersonal relationships. Because Yahweh is holy, every Israelite is expected to treat others, whether family members (19:3) the poor (19:10), or the stranger

⁹ Note the repeated reference to the stranger (16:29; 17:8, 10, 12, 13, 15; 18:26; 19:10, 33, 34; 20:2; 22:18; 23:22; 24:16, 22; 25:6, 35, 45, 47) and to the nations (18:24, 28; 25:44; 26:33, 38, 45) all of which occur from chapter 16 on.

(19:10), with respect and concern. The whole is summed up in verse 18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”¹⁰ Any people who would consistently apply the moral precepts of this chapter would stand out as a unique people among all the peoples of the earth. Finally, Moses is to warn Israel what will happen if they are spiritually unfaithful to Yahweh (20:1-27). This could occur either by practicing the abominations of the Canaanites (20:1-7) or by violating standards of sexual conduct (20:10-21). Once again, the theme of corporate witness emerges as Yahweh remonstrates: “. . .you shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine” (20:26).

As in the first section (1:1–15:33) which emphasized personal holiness and fellowship, the priests are addressed second as those whose responsibility it was to guide the people into the type of behavior that would reflect well upon the Lord (21:1–22:16). They are to exemplify the highest standards in their priestly duties, standards that were in stark contrast to the cultic prostitution that so characterized priests of the surrounding nations. They are not to profane the holy name of Yahweh but rather to hallow Him among the children of Israel (22:32). The priesthood of Israel had tremendous potential in positively representing the Lord to the surrounding peoples.

C. Corporately, Israel is instructed in the necessity of holy convocation (23:1-44).

As the nation celebrated set holy days they would be reminded of their own heritage, be encouraged concerning their future, and give testimony to the surrounding nations. The weekly Sabbath, and the first four feasts (Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, and Weeks) were designed to cause Israel to reflect on their relation to the Creator God, on His redemption, and on His ongoing provision for their every need. The last three, all occurring after a four month gap, looked forward to Israel’s full and final establishment in the land, something that is still future.¹¹ Three of these feasts (Passover/ Unleavened Bread, Weeks, Ingathering) required every Israelite male to appear before the Lord at the central sanctuary (cf. Exod 34:18-24). Had Israel been consistent in observing these festivals, the nations would have had powerful testimony to Yahweh’s character and purposes.

¹⁰ Note the command in 18:34 to love the stranger as oneself.

¹¹ For a discussion of the meaning of the feasts for Israel see Timothy K. Hui, “The Purpose of Israel's Annual Feasts,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:586 (April-June 1990):143-54. For their prophetic significance see Terry Hulbert, “The Eschatological Significance of Israel's Feasts” (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1965).

D. Israel is charged with vigilance in maintaining their testimony (24:1-23).

Since Yahweh was the giver of light and life (24:1-9) the people must be obedient in dealing with impurity in their midst. To this end the nation puts to death a blasphemer (24:10-23).

E. Israel's calendar is arranged to display Yahweh's faithful care (25:1-55).

When Israel came into the land Yahweh intended to bless them with its abundance. In order to safeguard its productivity and to identify God as the one who gave life from the earth, Israel was commanded to allow the ground to lie fallow every seventh year, and to go untilled for two years every fifty years (25:1-12). In addition, all property reverted to its original owner in the year of Jubilee, thus evidencing faith in Yahweh as the ultimate owner of all things (25:13-38). Oppression was to be no part of the Israelite's experience in the land (25:39-55).

F. Provision for the guarding of Yahweh's name among the nations through the promise of blessing and retribution (26:1-46).

If Israel obeyed Yahweh by honoring Him exclusively then He would bless them in the land (26:1-13). However, if they did not honor and obey Him then He would inflict retribution upon them in the land to the point of being banished from it altogether (26:14-39). When this happened their restoration, guaranteed by Yahweh's covenant faithfulness, would take place upon repentance and obedience (26:40-45).

G. A Tribute to Yahweh: Redeeming the Dedicated (27:1-34).

Yahweh's ultimate intent for Israel was that they come to honor Him voluntarily out of a pure devotion, born by gratitude for His gracious election and benevolence. Hence, the fitting conclusion to the book of fellowship and testimony describes the presentation of dedicatory offerings. Unlike the rest of the nations, Israel was to be a people who worshipped their God out of appreciation for His goodness and grace rather than in manipulation for His favor. This was the essence of the covenant at Sinai (27:34).

Conclusion

Leviticus begins where Exodus concludes, namely, with the method by which Israel could experience continually Yahweh's fellowship and thus fulfill their mandate of being His unique nation, bearing testimony to His sovereign majesty and grace. Through appropriate sacrifice the individual Israelite could come into the presence of the Lord in worship and devotion, having his sin covered by blood. The ceremonially unclean could be cleansed and the

clean made separate (holy) unto Yahweh's exclusive use. In this way He would manifest His character and draw other peoples into His salvation.

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