

Book of Leviticus

Leviticus 1:1 says the “the LORD called unto Moses, and spake unto him out of the tabernacle of the congregation” (or tent of meeting”), which reminds one that Leviticus is the sequel to Exodus.

Exodus ended with the erection of the tabernacle and God appearing in a cloud over the tent of meeting, the tent at the center of the tabernacle housing the ark and other sacred furniture (Exodus 40:16-38).

The laws in Leviticus form part of a historical narrative.

They are recorded to show how Israel became the nation it did.

They show what was involved in being called to be the people of God.

They illustrate how God’s covenant purpose to make them “a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6), was worked out in an all-embracing system of religious services and social law.

As they called the people back to the beginning of human history, they recalled the perfection of God and the perfection of His creation.

As the Israelites conformed their lives to the will of God, they would see the difference between their holy God and the gods of the Egyptians and their new pagan neighbors in Canaan.

The goal was to let a focus on ritual holiness and perfection draw them ever closer to moral holiness and perfection.

By making the perfection of God the focus of their lives, they would be more likely to reflect Him to the Gentile nations.

What the Israelites did not realize is that the law they agreed to pursue would actually serve as a “tutor to bring [them] to Christ, that [they] might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24).

They would discover that keeping the law would not produce the perfection that God required.

The laws of God were perfect, but the people themselves could never be by their own efforts.

Themes:

At least four important themes appear in this book that directly relate to the Book of Exodus.

Its recording of the Sinai covenant, and the erection of the tabernacle.

The first concept is “the presence of God in Israelite worship”, as repeatedly the ceremonies take place “before the LORD”.

And the food offerings make “a sweet savor unto the LORD” (e.g., 1:9, 13, 17; 2:9; 3:5).

This concept extends to all times, even in the mundane duties of life.

Second the concept of holiness in the motto of Leviticus: “Be holy, for I am holy” (11:44-45; 19:2; 20:6).

Holy (qadosh), and its cognate terms.

For example, “sanctify, holiness”, occur 152 times in Leviticus or about 20 percent of the total occurrences in the Old Testament.

“Unclean” (tame’), and its cognates occur 132 times, or more than 50 percent of the total Old Testament occurrences.

“Clean” (tahor) and related terms occur 74 times, or about 35 percent of the total Old Testament occurrences.

“Profane” (ehilel) occurs 14 times in Leviticus out of 66 references in the Old Testament.

In addition to these statistics, the language of sacrifice pervades the book.

The word “sacrifice” occurs about 40 times, “priest” is found about 190 times, “blood” about 85 times, and “atonement” about 45 times.

The third major concept emphasized is the “role of sacrifice” as (Hebrews 9:22) says.

“Almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission”.

The first 17 chapters in Leviticus are devoted to explaining the occasions for and the correct procedures to be followed in sacrifice.

The fourth area is that of the idea of the “covenant”.

It is one of the fundamental presuppositions informing the theology of Leviticus.

Leviticus is the sequel to Exodus.

At the heart of Exodus (chapters 19 to 26), is the Sinai covenant.

All that follows in Exodus is a working out of the covenant.

Leviticus explains how covenant worship should be conducted (chapters 1 to 17), then how the covenant people should behave (chapters 18 to 25), and closes with a section of blessings and curses, which is entirely appropriate to a covenant document (chapter 26).

Indeed, the (last verse of chapter 26), connects all that precedes with Sinai, where the covenant was concluded.

“These are the statutes and judgments and laws, which the LORD made between him and the children of Israel in mount Sinai by the hand of Moses” (26:46).

Historical Setting:

The core ideas around which Leviticus develops are the holy character of God and the will of God for Israeli’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; compare 1 Peter 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 (compare this emphasis in chapters 17 to 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 (see note on 11:44-45).

The theme of the conditional Mosaic Covenant resurfaces throughout the book, but particularly (in chapter 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. 738 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. Chapter 26 and Deut. Chapter 28; compare 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 (compare 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.

The Book of Exodus concludes with the erection of the tabernacle, which was constructed according to the pattern God gave to Moses.

How was Israel to use the tabernacle?

The instructions in Leviticus answer that question, and were given to Moses during the month and 20 days between the setting up of the tabernacle (Exodus 40:17), and the departure of the people from Sinai (Num. 10:11).

Authorship:

Authorship and date issues are resolved by the concluding verse of the book, "These are the commandments which the LORD commanded Moses for the sons of Israel at Mount Sinai" (27:34; compare 7:38; 25:1; 26:46).

The fact that God gave these laws to Moses (compare 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 chapters 8 to 10; 24:10-23).

The Exodus occurred in 1445 B.C. and the tabernacle was finished one year later (Exodus 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; compare Num. 1:1).

It is recorded in the book that God revealed His instructions to Moses, but it never states that Moses wrote down what he heard.

Thus the book's lack of explicitness about its literary origin is one reason for the great diversity of views among modern scholars.

Some liberal scholars want to date the book in the fifth century, about a thousand years after the conservative date for Moses.

Four strong arguments support a Mosaic authorship for the book.

The first argument is that the book always presupposes that the laws were given to Moses in the wilderness.

Time and again it is said, "The LORD spake unto Moses".

The wilderness setting is not only referred to in the introduction to each group of laws, but it is often alluded to in the laws themselves.

The sacrifices are offered in the tabernacle, and not in the temple (chapters 1 to 17); lepers must live outside the camp, not outside the city (13:46; and 17:1-9), presupposes that every Israelite is within easy reach of the tabernacle.

Also, the land of Canaan is viewed as a future reality where laws are depicted that would apply only to a settled people (14:34; 18:3; 23:10; 25:2).

Second, there is nothing in the book that could not date from the Mosaic period relating to sacrificial systems and elaborate rituals.

Many of Israel's neighbors even used the same terms for sacrifice in the fifteenth century B.C. (compare contemporary Ugarit documents from that area).

Third, the book is unsuited to the needs of the post-exilic age.

Chapters 18 and 20 deal at length with the question of marriage, but nothing is said about intermarriage with Canaanites, which was the burning issue in Ezra and Nehemiah's time (Ezra 9 and 10; Neh. 13:23-25).

The priests of Nehemiah's day seem opposed to reform, whereas Leviticus magnifies the office of high priest.

Also the tithe laws indicated about a ratio of 10 Levites to one priest in Leviticus, but (Ezra 8:15), reveals that after the exile there was a great shortage of Levites.

The lists in (Ezra 2:36-61 and Nehemiah 7:39-45), suggest a ratio of 12 priests to one Levite among the returning exiles.

Finally, the Book of Ezekiel quotes or alludes to Leviticus many times (compare 10:10 with Ezek. 22:26; compare 18:5 with Ezek. 20:11; compare chapter 26 with Ezek. chapter 34).

Title:

The original Hebrew title of this third book of the law is taken from the first word, translated "And He called".

Several Old Testament 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 Old Testament (LXX) "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.

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 (compare Exodus chapter 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 place (the tabernacle), instituted His law, and declared Himself a covenant partner with His subjects.

No geographical movement occurs in the 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 (compare Num. 1:1).

Approaching a Holy God – What it means:

Leviticus is very much a how-to book for ceremonies and worship practices within the Old Testament system.

But this third book of the Pentateuch also illustrates that God was concerned that His people do what is right, and do it in the right way. Here are its five interlocking themes:

Holiness: Holy and holiness occur in Leviticus more than any other book in the Bible.

Leviticus reveals that a God who is set apart from all other “gods” must have a similar people (11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7-8; 1 Peter 1:15-16).

The ceremonies detailed in this book are about serving Him as a holy and righteous God, as a God who sanctifies, or “makes holy”, His people (20:7-8).

Worship:

Approaching a holy God is not a casual undertaking.

Dealing with the sin that separates man from God requires sacrifice, which reflects death as the consequence of sin.

The payment for sin, through the offering of sacrifices “without blemish” or “defect”.

The sacrificial system was a lesson concerning the importance and cost of maintaining fellowship with the Holy God (22:17-25; Matt. 5:48).

Law:

Leviticus is filled with regulations and ordinances, all of which reveal our inability as humans to be perfect on our own.

The Levitical laws would set the stage for laws that would one day be written on the hearts of God’s people rather than on stone, replacing external obligation with internal motivation (See Jeremiah 31:33).

Presence:

God’ willingness to dwell in the midst of a sinful people, camped in Israel in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle, would be a sign of His forgiveness and grace toward those He redeemed to Himself.

It also foreshadowed the day when God would come to “tabernacle” (dwell), among humanity in human flesh and later in human hearts (Matt. 5:8; John 1:14; Heb. 10:22).

Atonement:

Sins can be atoned for in the manner of God's choosing (chapters 16 and 17; see 17:11).

In our English Bibles the word atonement is found over 50 times in Leviticus, with the basis meaning "to cover", or "to make a covering".

Old Testament atonement did not remove sins, but it covered sins until, ultimately, a final sacrifice would be made when the perfect Lamb of God offered Himself once and for all (Heb. 9:1-15, 24-28; 10:1-14).

Because He Is Near – What It Means For You:

It was no easy feat for the infant nation of Israel to learn God's ways and become a set-apart people.

In fact, they took many wrong turns on the way to the Promised Land.

They had to learn the implications of living their lives with a holy God in their midst.

This is true for believers today as well.

Even though every Christian has God's Spirit living within, there is need to be reminded of His nearness and cultivate a sense of His presence.

Paul wrote that believers should "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).

Scripture also urges us to "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

Finally, we have the matchless promise that "if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

The sure knowledge of God's constant presence should not only flood our lives with comfort, but fill us with a healthy dread of offending Him and grieving His Spirit.

It should also change the way we deal with one another.

As Paul reminded us in (Phil. 4:5), "Let your gentleness be known to all men.

The Lord is at hand".