

Leviticus: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT: *This short article provides a cursory introduction to this issue's focus book presenting key features, outline, themes, Gospel types and significance for ministry today.*

KEY WORDS: *introduction, placement, thesis, details, structure, themes, relevance, resources*

I. PLACEMENT & THESIS

Leviticus is the third book of the Old Testament and of the Pentateuch. Set at Sinai, it should be seen as a continuation of, or sequel to, the latter half of Exodus. And thus, Genesis to Judges forms one historical account. Exodus ends with the details of the Tabernacle. It answers the question of how to worship a holy God. Traces of this theme continue in Leviticus, though the question is broadened to how a sinful people might live before a holy God. This can be seen in Exodus ending with Moses not being able to enter the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:35) and Leviticus beginning with the Lord speaking "from the tent" (Leviticus 1:1). How must Israel relate to this holy God? It can be seen that holiness is a pivotal theme in Leviticus as a key verse near the centre of the book testifies, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). After Leviticus, Numbers opens with the Lord speaking to Moses "in the tent." (1:1). The Lord's prescription herein contained worked: Israel was able to meet with God in their midst.

II. DETAILS

Leviticus takes its name from the Septuagint and means “things concerning the Levites,” though it is a misnomer to think of the book as entirely concerned with them. The primary author is clearly Moses. Over thirty times the Lord speaks to Moses. Depending on a later or early dating of the Exodus, Leviticus was written either c. 1446 BC or c. 1260 BC. Leviticus is not only a different time but a different world: they do things differently there. We must conscientiously enter into the world of Leviticus to draw parallels for today.

III. LITERARY STRUCTURE OF LEVITICUS¹

Literary structure is key to hermeneutics. As with most books, many outlines have been made, each noting specific emphases. Leviticus is no different. However, like any book, there are common observable divisions:

Introduction (1:1–2a)

Rituals (1–7)

Priests (8–10)

Purity (11–15)

Blood and Day of Atonement (16–17)

Purity (18–20)

Priests (18–22)

Rituals (23–25, 27)

Covenant (26, 27:34)

1 The outline is an amalgamation of: “Outline of Leviticus,” *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 215–216; and “Leviticus,” Bible Project Book Overviews. <<https://bibleproject.com/explore/book-overviews/>> (2024). Despite the value of the Bible Project for book overviews theological caution is suggested for their other material.

Clearly from the structure, the need for atonement and the place of blood is central to the satisfaction of sin and living holy lives. Next are the commands that guide Israel, the priests who mediate (lit. go between the Lord and Israel), and finally the religious rituals that give shape to this shared life.

A summary may be offered of each section:

Introduction: The Lord spoke to Moses “from the tent” (1:1) indicating the need to worship and live before Him in holiness, or on His terms.

Rituals: The five main rituals are prescribed with their reasons and proper administration. The burnt offering and peace (or fellowship) offerings were connected with worship. The sin offering and guilt offering were connected with sin and forgiveness. The grain offering often mirrored the offering it accompanied. Together these offerings were a picture of God’s justice but also His mercy. The later feasts retold the national story of redemption so the people would remember what God had done. There were also special vows the Israelites could make. These laws were meant to be observed in faith (Romans 9:31–32), something revealed in Leviticus’ stress on whole-hearted devotion.

Priests: The first priestly section (chapters 8–10) describes the origin of the priesthood and how the priests were to enter the Lord’s presence. It also includes the first service at the tabernacle. The mirroring section (18–22) lists the qualifications of the priests. These high standards existed because they represented the people to God and God to the people. Lest priests disregard this, there is the warning of the “strange fire” offered by Nadab and Abihu, who were consumed (10:1–20).

Purity: God’s holiness is good, yet it is also dangerous—so all of Israel was to be holy before the Lord, not just the priests. The first purity section (chapters 11–15) prescribes the ritual purity of the Israelites and the second (18–20) prescribes their moral purity.

Blood and the Day of Atonement: Right at the centre of the book is the day of atonement and discussion about blood (cf. 17:11a below).

Two goats would be taken once a year, one being sacrificed and the other—the scape goat—receiving the sin of the people and being sent away. Both are symbolically powerful of what God does in order that His people might live with Him.

Conclusion and Postscript: Near to the end of the book, the covenantal blessings and curses connected with these laws were stipulated.

IV. KEY LEVITICAL THEMES

There are many themes that run across Leviticus. The following are some of the major ones:

Holiness: At its root, holiness means to be set apart, distinct, or other. The Lord is the Creator and Israel part of His creation. He is the Lawgiver and covenant partner.

Blood Sacrifice: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11a). For a sinner to escape God’s wrath, like in the Passover, blood needed to be shed, for “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23a). Hence the strong connection between blood and holiness.

Atonement: The sacrifice through which the believer is made to be “at one” with God (credit to William Tyndale [d. 1536] for coining this word).

Ceremonial and Moral Purity: These are often confused. God is holy. To live in His presence, Israel needed to approach Him in a state of holiness (clean/pure). This was not a moral category but a ceremonial one. If one were unclean, (e.g. touched a dead body, mould, etc., both symbols of death), one could not enter into God’s presence until a temporary period of time had lapsed and the individual then made clean again. Uncleanness was not the same as being immoral. However, there were moral commands: the Israelites were to be holy and reflect God’s truth, goodness, wisdom, and justice by caring for the poor, guarding their sexuality, and executing civil justice. They were to be righteous before Him in all He had commanded.

V. *GOSPEL*

Leviticus is placed between the giving of the Law and Tabernacle instructions at Sinai (Exodus) and breaking camp and heading for the Promised Land (Numbers). This is its canonical context. However, the primary hermeneutic for reading the Old Testament is Christology (e.g. the road to Emmaus, Luke 23:25–27). Christ, the holy one and great high priest, made the once-for-all sacrifice for His people so that through His atonement they might be made holy and—enabled by His Spirit—to keep His law and represent Him here on earth. Thus, through these types, the Levitical system, fulfilled in Christ, helps us understand and appreciate what Christ has done for the believer (cf. Hebrews 9–10), and our continued need of forgiveness. A living sacrifice, a holy priesthood, and living stones—all used by New Testament authors—harken back to Leviticus. Christian festivals (such as Passover and Pentecost) are rooted in Old Covenant celebrations. The holiness codes remind us of the sanctification we are called to after the moral Law of Christ. We cannot understand the New Testament if we do not first understand Leviticus.

VI. *ENDURING RELEVANCE*

Leviticus has contemporary relevance in several areas:

Holiness: To be distinct from the world, a common New Testament exhortation, is lost upon much of modern Evangelicalism’s bid to be relevant. However, we must remain principled and not merely pragmatic. Beyond external holiness, we must pursue an inner holiness, both individually and corporately.

Reverence & Worship: God is a consuming fire. While we may call Him the familial and respectful “Our Father,” this is a far cry from “daddy” and the want of the fear of the Lord. It is an awesome privilege to befriend a holy God. Likewise, we must not be given over to normative principles of worship where we dictate how we wish

to worship the One who has revealed how He is to be approached—these are strange fires.

Leadership: While “priest” and “Christian leader” are not synonymous at many points, there are still parallels. In an age that places fewer requirements on its Christian leaders, it is helpful to remember the high calling to which they are called.

Community: Christianity is personal but not private. It is deeply corporate. This communal-covenantal element of Leviticus can teach the often individualistic nature of the contemporary church a great deal.

Practicality: Christianity is relevant, just as Leviticus, with its graphic realism, made Israel’s relationship with the Lord a practical matter for everyday life.

Justice: Historically, Western society was in part based upon the civil laws contained in books such as Leviticus.

With these helps in mind, and others offered in this issue, why not try reading Leviticus in one sitting to help you capture the grand flow? It takes about two hours to read. Having persevered, it is hoped you will love Leviticus, if you have not come to do so already.

VII. *USEFUL RESOURCES*²

In addition to reading Leviticus, and other helpful works on related subjects appearing in the articles in this issue, there are a number of resources, popular and academic, contemporary and historic, to aid in studying this book. There are others of a more liberal vein that can prove helpful if used under a watchful eye.

2 Others added and some taken from “Best Commentaries of Leviticus,” Gospel Coalition <<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/recommendation/best-commentaries-leviticus/>> (2024).

Contemporary Popular/General

- Eveson, Philip. *The Beauty of Holiness: The Book of Leviticus Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Evangelical Press, 2015).
- Harper, Geoffrey G. *Teaching Leviticus: From Text to Message* (Christian Focus, 2022).
- Hartley, John. *Leviticus*, World Biblical Commentary (Zondervan, 2015).
- Tidball, Derek. *The Message of Leviticus*, The Bible Speaks Today (IVP, 2005).

Contemporary Academic

- Harrison, R. K. *Leviticus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP 2008).
- Kleinig, John W. *Leviticus*, Concordia Commentary (Concordia 2003).
- Ross, Allen P. *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Baker 2006).
- Skylar, Jay. *Leviticus*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary (Zondervan, 2023).
- . *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP, 2014).
- Wenham, Gordon J. *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans, 1979).

Historic

Church Fathers such as Chrysostom, Martin Luther; John Calvin, Matthew Henry; Andrew Bonar, John Gill and C. H. Spurgeon.