

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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Leviticus is thus a work of towering spirituality, which through the various sacrificial rituals points the reader unerringly to the atoning death of Jesus, our great High Priest. An eminent nineteenth-century writer once described Leviticus quite correctly as the seed-bed of New Testament theology, for in this book is to be found the basis of Christian faith and doctrine. The Epistle to the Hebrews expounds Leviticus in this connection, and therefore merits careful study in its own right, since in the view of the present writer it is preeminent as a commentary on Leviticus.

—R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*,
TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 9.

OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Leviticus

I. Introduction

- A. Leviticus has been called “the most neglected of the neglected biblical books.”¹
- B. “Although since the 1970s some significant proposals have been made regarding the meaning of offerings and prescriptions, the impression cannot be denied that **on the whole any serious grappling with the book has just begun.**”²
- C. In the Jewish tradition, Leviticus constitutes the most important section of the Torah. In fact, Jewish children once commenced their biblical studies with the Book of Leviticus.³
- D. “Genesis is the book of beginnings, Exodus the book of redemption, and Leviticus the book of atonement and a holy walk. In Genesis we see man ruined; in Exodus, man redeemed; in Leviticus, man cleansed, worshipping and serving.”⁴

¹ Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002), 1-2.

² N. Kiuchi, “Book of Leviticus,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 522, emphasis added.

³ Bernard J. Bamberger, *Leviticus*, The Torah: A Modern Commentary, 5 vols. (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1979), 3:xix.

⁴ Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 85.

II. Titles

A. Greek Title

1. *Leviticus* is the Latin title from which the English title is taken. Both are derived from the Greek title.
2. The Greek title is *λεβιτικον* (*leuiticon*), meaning “Levitical,” or “pertaining to the Levites.”
3. This title suggests that the book pertains in large part to priestly matters.
4. However, the term “Levites” appears only 4x in the book (24:32[x2], 33[x2]).
5. In reality, the book has *nothing* to do with the Levites, although it does pertain in some measure specifically to Aaron and his sons (e.g., Lev 10:8-11).
6. The intended audience is revealed at the start of the book when Yahweh tells Moses to “speak to the Israelites and say to them...” (Lev 1:2).

B. Hebrew Title

1. The Hebrew title is ויקרא, meaning “A He Called.”
2. The title is derived from the opening word of the book, consistent with the rest of the books of the Torah.
3. The opening scene of the book, however, does not precisely fit with the closing verse of Exodus. Rather, Exodus 40:36-38 seem to foreshadow what the narrator will resume beginning in Numbers 9—Israel’s journey through the wilderness following the cloud and fire of Yahweh.
4. Instead, Leviticus is best seen as an extended period of time (approx. 6 mos) that fits in between Exodus 40:35 and 40:36, following Yahweh’s filling of the tabernacle but prior to their journeying through the wilderness.
5. The title itself reveals an important aspect of the book: Leviticus is the most “red letter” book of the OT. In no other book does Yahweh directly speak more than in Leviticus. In fact, there are only two short narratives in the book (Lev 10:1-7; 24:10-23), and they seem to serve as graphic illustrations of the seriousness of Yahweh’s message to Israel, since both accounts involve the execution of individuals for sin.

III. Major Themes

A. The Presence of Yahweh

1. Yahweh has a pervasive presence throughout Leviticus.
2. The extensive offerings described throughout the book are all presented “before Yahweh” (Lev 1-6, 9-10, 16-17).
3. The daily activities of the Israelites are regulated by the reality of Yahweh’s presence among them. Because “I am Yahweh your God,” their activity must conform to Yahweh’s law, i.e., the “holiness code” (Lev 18-26).

4. This is more than spiritual presence. Yahweh is *physically* present among Israel, and for this reason the regulations that are given to Israel are critical for maintaining Yahweh's physical presence. If Israel cannot live in holiness, then Yahweh cannot physically reside among His people.

B. Holiness

1. The Hebrew root word קדש, "to be holy," occurs over 150x in Leviticus
2. The basic idea behind the term "holy" is the idea of *separation*. While this includes a separation from sin, it also can denote a separation for special service.
3. Key Passages:
 - a. "[You are to] make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean" (Lev 10:10).
 - b. "For I am Yahweh your God. Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. . . . For I am Yahweh, who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God, so you are to be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:44-45).
 - c. "Speak to all the congregation of the Israelites and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy'" (Lev 19:2)
 - d. "You shall consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am Yahweh your God" (Lev 20:7).
 - e. "Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I, Yahweh, am holy, and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine" (Lev 20:26).
4. "To understand the core theology of the book of Leviticus requires a clear grasp of the two polarities in [10:10] (i.e., holy versus common and unclean versus clean), which are the primary concern of the decrees of the Lord in this context."⁵

a. *The Holy vs. The Common/Profane*

- 1) Deals with the *status* of a person, place, or thing.
 - Yahweh is inherently holy in His nature, essence, and character (Lev 11:44, 45; 19:2, 20:7).
 - Israel was to be holy based on their function and relationship to Yahweh. Since they were employed by covenant in the service of Yahweh, they were to live and act in holiness as well (Lev 11:44, 45; 19:2, 20:6).
 - Things could also be consecrated as holy if they were dedicated for special use in Yahweh's service. Things might include sacrificed meat eaten by the priests (Lev 2:3, 10), elements used in worship (5:15, 16), the produce of the land (19:24), real estate (27:14), personal property (27:28), and even war spoils.

⁵ Richard E. Averbeck, "Theology of Leviticus," in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:918.

- Times were also holy, such as the Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread, harvest, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles, etc.
- 2) Clear distinction needed to be made between the holy and the common.
- There was nothing inherently evil about something that was common.
 - However, something that was holy was *never* to be treated as common. This was to *profane* a holy thing and bring it from the sphere of holiness into the sphere of commonality.
 - Something or someone who was common could come in contact with something holy and not profane it. But if a common item were used *as if* it were holy, or if a holy item were used *as if* it were common, such an action broke the barrier between the holy and the common, **e.g.**, while the priests could eat that which was “holy”, a lay Israelite could not because he would be treating something holy as if it was common, thus profaning it (Lev 22:10-15).
 - “An inviolable distinction between the spheres of the sacred [holy] and the common or profane had to be maintained. That which was inherently holy or designated so by divine decree or cultic rite was not to be treated as common. The maintenance of the integrity of holiness was a function of the Israelite cult. The regulations and prescriptions were designed to maintain the purity of holiness that characterized God’s essential nature.”⁶
 - Likewise, if something common was to be made holy, it first needed to be *consecrated* (sanctified, i.e., made holy) so that it could be used in the tabernacle (Lev 8:11-12; 21:8).
 - *Atonement* (see below) was required to consecrate anything or anyone to make it holy.

b. *The Clean vs. The Unclean*

- 1) Deals with the **condition** of a person, place, or thing, whatever their status might be (i.e., holy or common).
- It is important not to confuse holy/common and clean/unclean.
 - Something that was “clean” did not automatically make it “holy”. Similarly, something that was “holy” did not automatically make it “clean.”
 - Richard E. Averbeck illustrates this point:⁷

⁶ Jackie A. Naudé, “קָדָשׁ,” in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:879-80.

⁷ Richard E. Averbeck, “Clean and Unclean,” in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:481-2.

- “A priest had the status of a holy person...as opposed to a common person in Israel. But a priest of holy status could be in the condition of being either clean or unclean (e.g., a priest could marry and have children, but sexual intercourse made people unclean according to Lev 15:16-18).”
 - “On the one hand, becoming unclean did not change the status of a priest from holy to common—he did not need to go through another set of (re)consecration procedures in order to function as a priest after he was cleansed from his uncleanness. On the other hand, if he entered the tabernacle in an unclean condition, he would thereby defile the tabernacle and become responsible to bring a sin offering for his defilement of the tabernacle presence of God.”
 - “Again, on the one hand, his unclean *condition* did not affect his *status* as a holy priest, but his uncleanness could transmit uncleanness by simple contact to holy or common persons, places, or things. On the other hand, his holy status was not transmittable by simple contact to common persons, places, or things.”
- 2) Cleanness (i.e., purity) in Leviticus involves two realms: the physical and the spiritual.
- Physical uncleanness (Lev 11-15) could result from:
 - Eating unclean animals
 - Childbirth
 - Leprosy
 - Illness
 - Sexual intercourse
 - Spiritual uncleanness (Lev 18-20) could result from:
 - Sexual immorality
 - Idolatry
 - False worship
- 3) As is apparent, uncleanness was not always a result of sin. “Even that which is amoral must sometimes be given up in order not to hinder one’s service for God. This was a vital lesson for Israelites as much as it is for New Testament believers. Separating cases of infectious disease and a variety of bodily emissions from the congregation was as much for preventing the spread of disease as for a cure. Sin is not involved in all cases, as can be seen regarding the mildew in the structure of a house (Lev 14:33-53).”⁸
- 4) Why does Leviticus stress *physical purity* (i.e., cleanness) so much? “God was *physically present* with ancient Israel in the tabernacle; therefore, *physical*

⁸ William D. Barrick, “The Book of Leviticus,” <http://drbarrick.org/files/studynotes/Leviticus/Leviticus03.pdf> (accessed 2/12/2014).

purity laws were important for the proper maintenance of the Lord's physical presence in their midst."⁹

5) What purpose did cleanness/purity serve in the law?

- "The Israelites, by observing the laws of the clean and unclean, would be identifying himself/herself with the God Who gave those laws. Each Israelite also would demonstrate a visible distinction setting them apart from the heathen peoples living around them."¹⁰
- The purity laws also made it very clear to Israel that everyone was guaranteed to become unclean at points in life, whether from sin or from natural processes. Whatever the reason, their unclean condition pointed to the sinful *nature* of mankind, and it was their sinful nature that prevented them from approaching Yahweh at the tabernacle.

SUMMARY OF LEVITICAL CATEGORIES

Holy vs. Common	Clean vs. Unclean
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deals with the <i>status</i> of something • "Holy" refers to something set apart for special use in the worship of Yahweh • People, places, things, and times could be holy • Consecration involved moving something from common to holy • <i>Desecration</i> involved treating something holy as if it were common • A <i>guilt offering</i> (Lev 5:15) was needed to atone for a person or object that had been desecrated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deals with the <i>condition</i> of something • The condition or something did not change its status; if it was holy, it would remain holy even if it had become unclean • <i>Cleansing/purifying</i> involved making something clean that was unclean • <i>Defiling/contamination</i> involved making something unclean that was clean • A <i>sin offering</i> (Lev 5:2) was needed to atone for a person or object that had been defiled

C. The Sacrificial System

1. Introduction

- a. The very presence of the sacrificial system points to two important realities regarding the law of the Mosaic Covenant:
 - 1) There was an expectation that Israel would sin under the law
 - 2) There was a gracious provision by God for sin
- b. Categories of Offerings:
 - 1) *Personal Offerings* (Lev 1:1-6:7): offerings made by the individual Israelite, with the priest acting as mediator by manipulating the blood on the altar. This was for individual sin.

⁹ Averbeck, "Clean and Unclean," 4:478.

¹⁰ Barrick, "The Book of Leviticus," <http://drbarrick.org/files/studynotes/Leviticus/Leviticus03.pdf> (accessed 2/12/2014).

- 2) *Corporate Offerings* (e.g., Lev 16): offerings made by the High Priest on behalf of corporate Israel. This was to cleanse the nation and cover corporate sin.
- 3) *Sweet-savor Offerings* (Lev 1:9, 13, 17, 2:2, etc.): offerings which when burned were a “soothing aroma to Yahweh” because they signified either the commitment of the offerer, his thankfulness to God, or the fellowship and peace between the two.
- 4) *Non-sweet-savor Offerings*: offerings (sin and guilt offerings) which were not “a soothing aroma to Yahweh” because they dealt with sin that broke fellowship with God.

2. The Offerings

- a. **Burnt Offering** (עֹלָה, *ōlā* [Lev 1:3-17; 6:8-13]): offered to make atonement for sin in general as a demonstration of one’s dedication and renewed commitment to Yahweh.
- b. **Grain/non-meat Offering**: (מִנְחָה, *minhâ* [Lev 2:1-16; 6:14-23]): offered in thankfulness for Yahweh’s generous and bountiful provision, expressing one’s dedication and praise to God.
- c. **Peace Offering** (שְׁלֵמָה, *šēlēm* [3:1-17; 7:11-18]): offered in celebration that the disharmony caused by sin has been resolved and the offerer is in harmony with the God of covenant faithfulness.
- d. **Sin/Purification Offering** (חַטָּאת, *ḥattā’t* [4:1-5:13; 6:24-30]): offered as a confession to God for one’s sin or impurity in recognition of the effects of one’s sins on the covenant community and in hopes of restoring fellowship with God.
- e. **Guilt** (אֲשָׁם, *’āšām* [5:14-6:7; 7:1-10]): offered to demonstrate one’s recognition of the breach in relationship between the sinner and God and perhaps another person who was wronged in the process, as well as to demonstrate one’s willingness to make proper restitution.

3. The Process

- a. The OT believer was *intimately involved* in the personal offerings. He selected the animal from his herd, took it to a specific part of the tabernacle complex, laid his hands on it, slaughtered it, skinned it, cut it into pieces, and washed its entrails.
- b. The priest was responsible to do what the common Israelite could not do: offer the blood and the sacrifice on the altar.
- c. The process was arduous and costly. An individual who had become aware of sin in his life would normally go through the following procedure:
 - 1) Give a **sin offering** in recognition that a sin had occurred
 - 2) Give a **guilt offering** in recognition of a breach in fellowship
 - 3) Give a **burnt offering** to demonstrate his renewed commitment to Yahweh
 - 4) Give a **grain offering** to demonstrate his thankfulness for God’s grace

- 5) Give a **peace offering** to celebrate the renewed harmony with God
 - d. Such a process was costly in time, in money (animals), and in energy.
 - e. In addition, the hands-on killing of perhaps four animals was a repeated, tangible reminder of the cost of sin and the grace of Yahweh to offer a means of forgiveness and a return to fellowship with Him.
4. The Priests
- a. Without the priests there was no sacrificial system. They mediated between the people and God by offering the blood of the sacrifices on the altar.
 - b. They were also, through the line of Aaron, the only ones who could offer sacrifices on behalf of corporate Israel on the Day of Atonement.
 - c. The priests were responsible to teach Israel how to live so that they maintained the distinction between holy and common things and remained conditionally clean. Without this knowledge, Israel was at risk (Lev 10:8-11; cf. 15:31).

PRINCIPLES FROM THE LEVITICAL SACRIFICES

1.	OT sacrifices <i>were to be offered by believers only</i> . Those believers were <i>indoctrinated</i> and <i>obedient</i> (i.e., they exhibited <i>right teaching</i> and <i>right behavior</i> [Lev 1:2-3; 2:1; 17:8; 22:18, 25]).
2.	OT sacrifices <i>were to be the outward demonstration of a vital faith</i> . Without faith the sacrifices were worthless (cf. Heb 11:4).
3.	OT sacrifices <i>did not save from sin nor forgive sins</i> . The levitical sacrifices included no provision for the sinful nature of mankind. The animal sacrifices were insufficient to atone for the sins of human beings—only a human life could atone for a human life (cp. Lev 1:3. Ps 49:5-9; Gal 3:0-14; Heb 10:1-18; 1 Pet 1:18-19).
4.	OT sacrifices <i>did not take care of every sin—especially willful, defiant sin</i> . Many sins required capital punishment—no sacrifice would avail for such sin. (Note: That no sacrifice was available for capital offenses does not mean that God did not or could not forgive capital offenses. The legal consequences required death. Such consequences should not be confused with one's ultimate spiritual relationship to God. [Lev 24:10-23])
5.	OT sacrifices <i>had fellowship with God as their chief object</i> . They outwardly symbolized forgiveness for sins, which resulted in continued communion with the covenant-keeping God of Israel (Exod 29:42-43; 30:36).
6.	OT sacrifices <i>declared, emphasized, and magnified sin and its consequences</i> (Rom 3:19-20; 5:20a; 7:50-11).
7.	OT sacrifices <i>declared, emphasized, and magnified God's holiness, righteousness, love, grace, mercy, and sovereignty</i> (Ps 119:62; Neh 9:13; Matt 23:23; Rom 7:12).
8.	OT sacrifices <i>demonstrated that there was no totally independent access to God for the OT believer under the Mosaic legislation</i> (Heb 9:8-10).
9.	OT sacrifices <i>demonstrated that God's desire with regard to the giving of His people did not go beyond their normal ability</i> . The sacrificial objects (cattle, sheep, goats, doves; flour, oil, wine, and frankincense) were all immediately available to the individual Israelite. God did not require that His people bring something exotic or beyond their normal means. He did not require them to extend themselves to the point of either economical discomfort or disaster (1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 8-9).
10.	OT sacrifices <i>emphasized the ministry of the priesthood</i> (Lev 1:9; 2:8; 4:20; 6:6; Heb 5-10; 1 Pet 2:5).
11.	OT sacrifices <i>involved the recognition of God's covenant with His people</i> (Lev 2:13; Ps 50:5, 16).
12.	OT sacrifices <i>were commanded by God for the maintenance of the priesthood</i> . The covenant community provides for those who minister (Lev 7:34-35; Neh 13:5; Mal 3:8-10).

THE LEVITICAL SACRIFICES

	Burnt	Grain	Peace	Sin	Guilt
Passage	Lev 1:3-17; 6:8-13; 7:8	Lev 2:1-16; 6:14-23	Lev 3:1-17; 7:11-36	Lev 4:1-5:13; 6:24-30	Lev 5:14-6:7; 7:1-10
Nature of Offering	Completely burned except hide	Token burned	Fat burned Remainder eaten	Fat Burned Remainder Eaten	Fat Burned Remainder Eaten
Kind of Offering	Male without blemish from herd or flock, or two birds	Grain with oil and frankincense	Male or female from herd or flock without blemish	Animal, bird, or flour	Animal, bird, or flour
Action of Offerer	1.Brings animal 2.Hand on head 3.Kills animal 4.Cuts animal 5.Washes entrails	1.Brings offering 2.Takes handful	1.Brings offering 2.Hand on head 3.Kills animal 4.Cuts animal 5.Eats part of animal	Same as burnt offering	Same as burnt offering + Restitution
Action of Priest	1.Blood on altar 2.Pieces on altar 3.Keeps hide	1.Burns handful 2.Eats the rest	1.Blood on altar 2.Burns fat 3.Eats part of animal	1.Same as burnt offering 2.Burns fat 3.Eats meat	Same as sin offering
Purpose	To atone for basic human sinfulness; demonstrates offerer's dedication/commitment to Yahweh	To render tribute to the sovereign Yahweh in thankfulness to His generous provision	To praise Yahweh and declare fellowship with Him	To atone for unwitting sin or to purify uncleanness	To repair a breach of faith between God and/or someone else
Type	Sweet-Savor Offerings			Non-Sweet-Savor Offerings	
	These offerings are a "soothing aroma" to God (1:13, 17; etc.) because sin has been atoned and they represent the offerer's commitment and dedication to Yahweh.			These offerings are not "soothing aromas" to God because they deal with a breach of fellowship caused by sin.	

IV. Purpose

- A. The purpose of Leviticus must be understood in connection with the purpose of the Torah as a whole:

Book	Purpose Statement
Torah	God chose Israel as the seed of Abraham to be the priestly nation that would restore mankind to its proper role as rulers for God over His created earth.
Genesis	The God of Creation chose to bless sinful mankind through Abraham and his Seed who will inherit the Land.
Exodus	Yahweh (the God of Creation, the God of the Patriarchs) redeemed/delivered the Sons of Israel from bondage in Egypt and entered into a Covenant with the Nation of Israel at Sinai.
<i>Leviticus</i>	<i>Yahweh gave instructions that enabled Him to live among His chosen people and enabled His people to have fellowship with Him.</i>
Numbers	
Deuteronomy	

V. The Literary Structure

- A. There have been charges that there is no apparent literary structure in Leviticus.
B. However, it appears that there is a literary arrangement:

LEVITICUS

I. The Way to a Holy God (1:1-16:34) The means by which redeemed Israel would maintain their personal relationship with Yahweh
A. The Legislation concerning the Offerings (1:1-7:38) 1. The Instruction concerning the Offerings (1:1-6:7) 2. The Instruction to the Priests (6:8-7:38)
B. The Installation of the Priesthood (8:1-10:20)
C. The Instruction to the People concerning the Clean and Unclean (11:1-15:33)
D. The Instruction to Aaron and the People concerning the Day of Atonement (16:1-34)
II. The Holy Walk of Yahweh's People (17:1-27:34) How redeemed Israel would reflect Holy Yahweh in daily life
A. The Warning Concerning Improper Sacrifice to the 'Goat Idols' (17:1-6)
B. The Instructions Concerning the Holy Conduct of the People (18:1-20:27)
C. The Instruction Concerning the Holy Conduct of the Priests (21:1-22:33)
D. The Instruction Concerning the Holy Times of the Nation (23:1-25:55)
E. The Blessings and Curses of the Mosaic Covenant (26:1-46)
F. The Instruction Concerning Vows and Tithes (27:1-34)

VI. Recommended Resources

Mark Rooker. *Leviticus*. New American Commentary. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holdman, 2000.

R. K. Harrison. *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980.

Allen P. Ross. *Holiness to the LORD: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002.

William D. Barrick. "Leviticus." 14 parts. <http://drbarrick.org/teaching/leviticus/> (accessed 2/14/2014).