

Leviticus

By Dr. Alan Cobb

Background

The title in the Torah comes from the first word, *wayiq'ra'* (וַיִּקְרָא) which translates as “then called” and indicates that what follows is a continuation of what was written in the book of Exodus. The common title, Leviticus, is derived from the Latin title, *Liber Leviticus* (Book Leviticus). It has its origin from the Septuagint (Jewish translation of the Hebrew into Greek) which is *Leuitikon* and means “relating to Levites.” This title is appropriate since the focus of the material in the book is the requirements of the God’s covenant with the Israelites for how they were to worship him at the Tabernacle and work of the priests to accomplish this worship. But the book is not just a manual for the priest’s activities but also what the entire community was expected to do as part of the worship. It tells a person when to go to the sanctuary, what to bring, and what the priests would do.

Date and Author

Many times throughout the book we find the following phrase or something similar to it: “the Lord called / said to Moses.” That explains to us that God gave these instructions to Moses when he was on Mt. Sinai and then Moses taught them to the priests and Israelites so that after the Tabernacle had been constructed and set up the worship could begin. Since the priests and people would need to refer to these instructions daily, it seems most likely that Moses wrote all of this down as the Tabernacle was being constructed and that would place the writing of Leviticus during the last months of 1491 BC and the first months of 1490 BC while they were camped at the base of Mt. Sinai. Since the book of Job is thought to be authored earlier, that would make Leviticus the second oldest book of the Bible.

Scope and Purpose

Since the material is about the way to worship God at the Tabernacle, it expands upon what little Moses would later write in Exodus. Covenants that a ruler made with his people not only specified what the ruler would do for the people but also what the people would do for the ruler. So, here we are told who would be the mediators of the covenant between God and the people. Moses was the primary mediator because he was the one God used to bring the people to Mt. Sinai and to deliver the Covenant and instructions to the people, but Aaron and his sons would also act as mediators under his authority until he died and then the office of mediator would continue through Aaron and his descendants. As in other covenants, there were explicit instructions for when the people were to appear before the King (God), what they were to bring, and how they were to act before and to honor a holy God. The people were to recognize that appearing before God and honoring him is a privilege and not just a pious ritual and that everything written here was their responsibility to accomplish as part of their relationship with God under the Covenant.

Leviticus is the last book of the Bible that most believers study if ever and that is because they don’t see its value. So, when believers begin a plan of reading the Bible within a year, they usually get bogged down in Leviticus and may even falter in the reading plan or at least skip Leviticus altogether. But Paul wrote to Timothy that “all scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.” (2 Tim 3:16) So believers can learn about righteousness and holiness from this book as well as the importance of how a person approaches and relates to God. This book was one of the first things a young Israelite was taught and learned to read. When Paul wrote that all scripture was profitable, he was referring to the only scriptures that were available and that was the 39 books of what is currently known as the Old Testament. Many of the things the New Testament authors wrote are better understood by knowing all the writings of the Old Testament including Leviticus. We especially learn more about the necessity of the sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin, the restoration of righteousness, and the honoring of God in thankfulness.

Outline

The following outline of the book (from Dr. Thomas Constable's notes) gives us an overview of the contents of Leviticus.

- I. The public worship of the Israelites (chs. 1 – 16)
 - A. The laws of sacrifice (chs. 1 – 7)
 1. The burnt offering (ch. 1)
 2. The meal offering (ch. 2)
 3. The peace offerings (ch. 3)
 4. The sin offerings (4:1 – 5:13)
 5. The trespass offerings (chapter 5:14 – 6:7)
 6. Instructions for the priests concerning the offerings (6:8 – 7:38)
 - B. The institution of the Aaronic priesthood (chs. 8 – 10)
 1. The consecration of the priests and the sanctuary (ch. 8)
 2. The entrance of Aaron and his sons into their office (ch. 9)
 3. The sanctification of the priesthood (ch. 10)
 - C. Laws relating to ritual cleanliness (chs. 11 – 15)
 1. Uncleaness due to contact with certain animals (ch. 11)
 2. Uncleaness due to childbirth (ch. 12)
 3. Uncleaness due to skin and covering abnormalities (chs. 13 – 14)
 4. Uncleaness due to bodily discharges associated with reproduction (ch. 15)
 - D. The Day of Atonement (ch. 16)
 1. Introductory information (16:1 – 10)
 2. Instructions concerning the ritual (16:11 – 28)
 3. Instructions concerning the duty of the people (16:29 – 34)
- II. The private worship of the Israelites (chs. 17 – 20)
 - A. Holiness of conduct on the Israelites' part (chs. 17 – 20)
 1. Holiness of food (ch. 17)
 2. Holiness of the marriage relationship (ch. 18)
 3. Holiness of behavior toward God and man (ch. 19)
 4. Punishments for serious crimes (ch. 20)
 - B. Holiness of the priests, gifts, and sacrifices (chs. 21 – 22)
 1. The first list of regulations for priests (21:1 – 15)
 2. The second list of regulations for priests (21:16 – 24)
 3. The third list of regulations for priests (ch. 22)
 - C. Sanctification of the Sabbath and the feasts of Yahweh (ch. 23)
 1. The Sabbath (23:1 - 3)
 2. The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread (23:4 – 8)
 3. The Feast of Firstfruits (23:9 – 14)
 4. The Feast of Pentecost (23:15 – 22)
 5. The Feast of Trumpets (23:23 – 25)
 6. The Day of Atonement (23:26 – 32)
 7. The Feast of Tabernacles (23:33 – 44)

- D. The preparation of the holy lamps and showbread (24:1 – 9)
- E. The punishment of a blasphemer (24:10 – 23)
- F. Sanctification of the possession of land by the sabbatical and jubilee years (ch. 25)
 - 1. The sabbatical year (25:1 – 7)
 - 2. The Year of Jubilee (25:8 – 55)
- G. Promises and warnings (ch. 26)
 - 1. Introduction to the final conditions of the covenant (26:1 – 2)
 - 2. The blessing of fidelity of the law (26:3 – 13)
 - 3. The warning for contempt of the law (26:14 – 33)
 - 4. The objective of God's judgments in relation to the land and nation of Israel (26:34 – 46)
- H. Directions concerning vows (ch. 27)
 - 1. Vows concerning persons (27:1 – 8)
 - 2. Vows concerning animals (27:9 – 13)
 - 3. Vows concerning other property (27:14 – 29)
 - 4. The redemption of the tithes (27:30 – 34)

Overview

Since worship is the main theme of Leviticus, it is appropriate that the book begins with the nature of sin and God's provisions for the atonement of sin. The sinfulness of man is recognized as his nature and this is in agreement with Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God's single command for them. Their resultant spiritual death was genetically passed on to their descendants who were thus predisposed to disobey God. The Hebrew word *kodesh*, which means holy, is used over 150 times in Leviticus and is even used in relation to personal hygiene. It means to be pure, unblemished, blameless, and clean. So the opposite of being holy is being impure, blemished, unclean, and having blame. God is holy and man, by nature, is unholy so for man to have a relationship with God, man's inherited nature has to be dealt with. In the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve sinned, God atoned for (covered) their sin by killing animals and making clothes from their skins to cover their sin. In Leviticus we see that the atonement for sin requires the shedding of the blood of a pure, unblemished sacrifice, just like God provided for Adam and Eve. This entire sacrificial system points forward to the fulfilling of God's promise that a future descendant of Eve would ultimately make atonement for sin and restore the relationship between God and man. The only way that a descendant of Eve could provide the sacrifice that would finally pay the price for sin by the shedding of pure, unblemished blood is if that descendant did not have the inherited sin nature. That is what God did by the power of the Holy Spirit creating Jesus as a human in Mary's womb. Since Jesus was not created by the union of an egg and sperm, he did not have the inherited nature of sin and thus could be a pure, unblemished sacrifice whose shed blood could completely atone for sin forever. For the Israelites to be restored to a right relationship with God, they had to believe what God had provided and have faith in God's promise that the penalty of the sin was removed from them. In the same way, for people to have the penalty of sin removed in their lives, they must believe in (accept) God's provision of Jesus as the perfect sacrifice to atone for sin and have faith (trust) in God's promise that Jesus' death really removes that penalty from their lives and will provide them a right relationship with God for eternity. The sacrificial system God provided for the Israelites was a temporary system so the sacrifice had to be provided again and again, but it pointed back to what God had done in the Garden of Eden and what he promised to do in the future. The people needed to respond with faith in God's promise and what he was currently providing for them by obeying the requirements for the offerings and the way they were supposed to live.