

Leviticus

The Hebrew title of the book of Leviticus comes from the first word of the book, *vayikra*, translated “And He [Yahweh] called.” The point was to remind Israel that they were to obey the laws that followed because they came from the One who had called them out of slavery. The more familiar English title, “Leviticus,” comes from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), which had as the title *levitikon*, meaning “relating to the Levites.” This title is appropriate since the book contains requirements of the Mosaic Covenant that relate to the Levites, or more specifically, the priests. Leviticus is the sequel to Genesis and Exodus in the Torah.¹

The first word of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers has a prefix—the Hebrew letter *waw*. This is called a *waw*-consecutive, which creates a conjunction with the meaning of “and” or “and the.” This means that they were meant to be read as the sequel to Genesis—and sequentially from there.

Leviticus was written by Moses sometime after the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. Though many dispute Moses as the author of the Torah, Scriptures affirm his authorship (Ex. 17:14; 24:4; Num. 33:1-2; Deut. 31:9; Josh. 1:8; 2 Kgs. 21:8). Jesus Christ also attributed authorship to Moses (Matt. 19:8; Mark 7:10; Luke 18:29-31; 20:37; 24:27; John. 7:19).²

Setting

Genesis began by revealing Yahweh as unique and sovereign creator over all creation, unlike the pagan gods. Yahweh created humanity as His image bearers to rule and subdue creation in His likeness. He then placed them in His garden being a tabernacle wherein Yahweh could dwell with humanity in a special relationship. However, humanity lost this intimate relationship with Yahweh when they chose self-autonomy over obeying Yahweh and being in a relationship with Him. However, because Yahweh is also a loving and covenantal God, He pursued humanity in their constant rebellion. Yahweh then chose Abraham and His descendants in order to work out His plan of redemption for all of humanity and creation. Yahweh promised to give them land, to make them a great nation, to bless them, and to make them a blessing to the whole earth. Yahweh’s ultimate goal was to make Abraham into the great nation of Israel to serve Him by becoming a righteous people who would represent Him as His image so that they could bless the entire world by restoring the world back to what was lost in the garden.

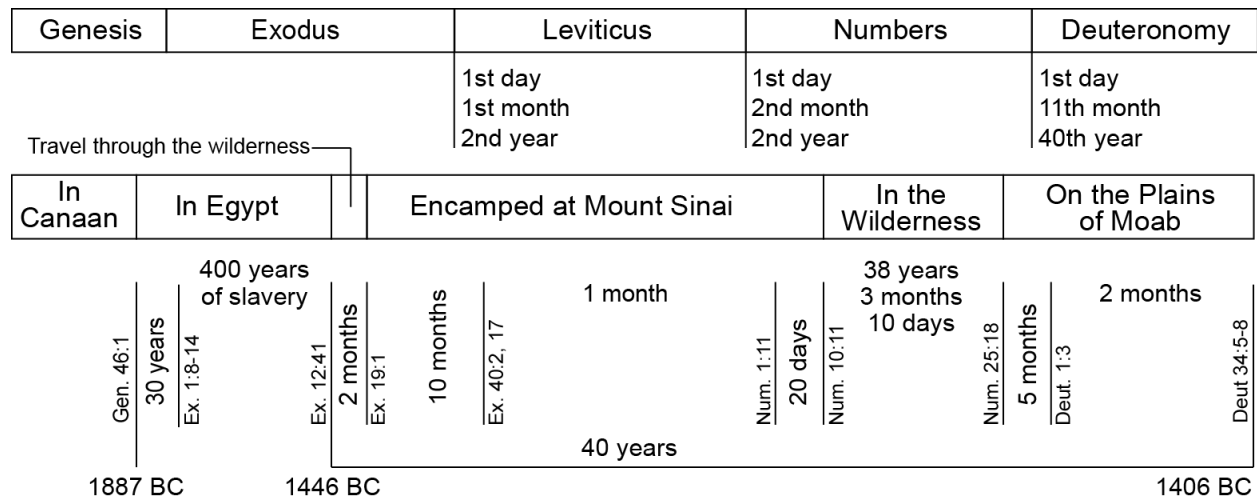
The book of Exodus begins with the narrator showing that the family of Jacob (the descendants of Abraham), which had entered Egypt at the end of Genesis, had grown into a great multitude, just as Yahweh had promised Abraham in Genesis. However, this people group had also become slaves in Egypt and had begun to take on the identity of Egypt and the worship of their gods. In

¹ *Torah* is the Hebrew name for the first five books of the Old Testament. The name means “teachings” or “instructions” and was considered the foundational teachings of the Jewish faith and, later, the Christian faith. The purpose of the Torah is to teach that people can experience Yahweh’s blessing by trusting Him and by obeying His will.

² Jesus Christ did not specifically say that Moses wrote Exodus, but in His day Jews regarded the Torah as a whole unit and recognized Moses as its author. Thus, they would have understood what Jesus said about any of the five books of Moses as an affirmation of Moses’ authorship of them all. Oswald T. Allis’s *The Five Books of Moses* is a rebuttal of the denial that Moses wrote the Torah. No one has discredited it, though liberal scholars have ignored it.

response, Yahweh called Moses out of the wilderness in order to go back to Egypt, to deliver His people from bondage, and to bring them to Mount Sinai where they would be brought into the presence of Yahweh and officially become His chosen nation. It is here that Yahweh will give them the Law and the instructions for the tabernacle. The Law would reveal Yahweh's righteous standards by which they were to live so that they could be the image of God to the world. The tabernacle would be a means for Yahweh to dwell with His people and guide them. This is the beginning of the restoration of the garden.

Leviticus records the events of Israel encamped at Mount Sinai in the first month of the second year after Israel had departed from Egypt (see chart below). It took Israel three months to arrive at Mount Sinai after the exodus from Egypt (Ex. 13-15). Now they have spent the last year at Mount Sinai receiving the Law and building the tabernacle. Yahweh approved of the tabernacle by entering the holy of holies in the image of the pillar of cloud and fire. However, Moses, Israel's representative, could not enter the tabernacle because of Israel's sin of worshiping the golden calf (Ex. 40:34-35). Even though Yahweh had forgiven Israel, they were still defiled by their sin. Those who are unclean and unholy cannot enter the presence of Yahweh. The book of Leviticus is the instructions for the sacrificial system and the revealing of the rest of Yahweh's Law. It is here that Israel learned what it meant to be clean and unclean, holy and common, along with the means to become clean and holy after one had become defiled by sin or death. The sacrificial system would atone for/cover their sins so that they would be able to enter His presence and be His people. The book climaxes in the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), on which the high priest cleansed the tabernacle and the people so that they could enter Yahweh's presence and set off for the Promised Land (the book of Numbers).



Purpose

Leviticus reveals how a sinful Israel could have and maintain a relationship with the holy Yahweh who dwelt among them and could express that relationship through worship. How Israel was to worship Yahweh is the sole focus of the book. Worship is not just in music and praise but in how one presents him or herself in obedience and righteousness before Yahweh (1 Sam. 15:2-23) and in service to Him in creation in order to expand His kingdom.

In Gen. 2:15, the Hebrew word for “to serve, till” is used of cultivating the soil (Gen. 2:5; 3:23; 4:2, 12, etc.). The word is commonly used in the religious sense of serving God (Deut. 4:19) and

of the priests serving in the tabernacle (Num. 3:7-8; 4:23-24, 26, etc.). To “guard, keep” can mean guard (Gen. 4:9; 30:31) but is used more commonly of religious commands and duties (Gen. 17:9; Lev. 18:5) and the guarding of the tabernacle (Num. 1:53; 3:7-8). These are the root words for worship used throughout Scripture. Never does Scripture use the word *worship* for singing songs. This is called *praise*. Worship, as portrayed in the Bible, is dedicating one’s life to working in the garden/creation/kingdom of Yahweh in order to do His will (Rom. 12:1). Praise is what you do when you have already worshiped Yahweh throughout the week and have seen Him at work in your life.

Genesis 1-2 clearly established that the focus is on the fact that Yahweh had created a tabernacle on earth so that He could dwell with humanity. Genesis 1 made the point that humanity was to rule over the garden and creation, maintaining its order and goodness. Genesis 2 made the point that humanity was to be priests serving in the garden/tabernacle of Yahweh. The purpose of a priest is to mediate between Yahweh and creation. This means the priest links Yahweh and creation together in a covenantal relationship.

The tabernacle became a microcosm of the garden that humanity had lost. Through sacrifice, which Scriptures define as means of worship (Jn. 15:10; Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15; 1 Pet. 4:17; 1 Jn. 3:24; 5:3), Israel cleansed themselves and made themselves holy so that they could reenter the presence of Yahweh (“the garden”). Likewise, it was through Israel’s obedience to Yahweh’s Law, as revealed in the Torah, that one was able to live a holy life in the world and reflect the character and image of Yahweh to those around them. Through their sacrifice and obedience, Israel worshiped Yahweh with their lives.

Rom. 12:1 clearly states that presenting our bodies and our lives in obedience to Yahweh is our greatest act of worship. If Yahweh is righteous and holy and we are commanded to reflect Him in this, then the greatest way to glorify and worship Him is through our obedience and righteous acts. Leviticus details how one is to live an obedient life and thus enter the presence of Yahweh in order to worship Him. Though we are not under the Law, we are still commanded by Law to know His Law and meditate on it. As one looks at the laws in the Torah, the historical context of the laws should be considered. They are not timeless, universal precepts; rather, they were revealed to the covenant nation of Israel at a particular time in their history. They were designed to mold Israel into a holy people in a particular historical time period. Though Yahweh’s holiness is unchanging, its expression may vary from age to age. Thus, we can find what the underlying principle in the Law is and then, through the Holy Spirit, who is the living Law of Yahweh written on our hearts, implement those principles in our own lives as we seek to obey Yahweh.

Themes

The three most dominant themes in Leviticus are the ideas of Yahweh’s presence, His holiness, and the atonement He provides. The holiness of Yahweh cannot tolerate humanity’s sin, and a sinful humanity cannot stand in the presence of Yahweh’s holiness. Thus, there is a barrier and separation between the two. However, the means of atonement that Yahweh has provided and in which humanity participates by faith joins the two together again.

The Presence of Yahweh

Yahweh made His presence known in a visible and tangible way as He appeared to Israel on Mount Sinai and in the tabernacle as the pillar of cloud and fire. The sovereign and transcendent God of the universe entered space, time, and matter in order to dwell with His people whom He loved and chose. However, this meant that Israel would have to be holy as Yahweh was holy in order to maintain a relationship with Yahweh. Leviticus distinguishes between Yahweh's general presence in the camp and His localized presence in the holy of holies. As you become more holy, you are able to get closer to the presence of Yahweh. This required atonement for sin and obedience to His Law. The question that each Israelite had to ask was it worth it and did they trust and love Him enough to obey Him?

The Israelites were assured of Yahweh's blessing as long as they stayed committed to the covenant and its terms. But if they broke the covenant, they were warned to expect Yahweh's judgment. The judgment after the worship of the golden calf emphasized the seriousness of sin and the need for atonement. However, one incident was hardly enough to change ingrained attitudes that had developed over many years. All human efforts without divine aid are in vain. The same point is made several times in Lev. 26. If the Israelites disobeyed the law, Yahweh would walk in a way contrary to them (Lev. 26:21, 24, 28, 41). But if they obeyed Him, they were promised His blessings and presence (Lev. 26:12). A constant reminder of Yahweh's presence and holiness was needed, along with continuous atonement for sin. This was provided through the tabernacle, the priesthood, and the sacrificial system. According to Ex. 29:43-45, Yahweh's real and visible presence in the tabernacle was at the heart of the covenant. This is how Yahweh chose to make Himself known to Israel.

Yahweh is preeminently present in worship. The laws on sacrifice say repeatedly that the ceremonies take place "before Yahweh" and the food offerings are "a soothing aroma for Yahweh" (Lev. 1:9, 13, 17; 2:9; 3:5). Leviticus tells about Yahweh's character and will, which found expression in its dealings with Israel and the Law He gave them. In one sense, Yahweh was always present with His people (Ex. 33:14; 40:36-38). Yahweh was not only present in worship but in the mundane tasks of life. Leviticus knows of nothing that is beyond Yahweh's concern or control. The whole of humans' lives must be lived out before the presence of Yahweh. "I am Yahweh your God" (Lev. 18:2; 19:3-4, 10; 20:7) reminds the people of Israel that every aspect of life, religion, sex, relationships with others, is the concern of their covenant redeemer. The behavior of each person in the covenant community must mirror that of Yahweh and tell the truth about who He is (Lev. 20:7).

Holiness

The central theme of the book of Leviticus is holiness and is intended to show how Israel was to fulfill its covenant responsibility to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6; Lev. 26:5). The only one who is truly holy is Yahweh. His very name is holy (Lev. 20:3; 22:32), which depicts His essence. The word "holy" (*kodesh*) occurs more than 150 times in Leviticus, more than in any other book of the Bible.

But what does holiness mean? The Bible often communicates holiness as a communicable attribute of Yahweh (that is, characteristics of God that we as His image bearers can share—love, gentleness, etc.). Yet the Bible also seems to communicate different concentric circles of meanings of holiness in that it is one of Yahweh's non-communicable attributes (that is,

characteristics of Yahweh that we as His image bearers *cannot* share—omnipotent, omniscient, etc.). The question is, what does the holiness of Yahweh mean at its most concentrated center?

Some have understood holiness by its etymology, or what it means. Holiness is then defined as being separate, as in Yahweh is separate from all things. But this is very lacking in its meaning when you get to the throne room of Yahweh in Isa. 6 and the angels are declaring Yahweh as separate, separate, separate. This sounds very lacking and unimpressive if this is all they are saying. Others define it in terms of morality. But once again are the angels really declaring Yahweh as moral, moral, moral.

In its most concentrated meaning, holiness is an adjective reserved for Yahweh alone. The angels are declaring that Yahweh is holy, holy, holy. Only He is truly God, and He is God in a way unlike anything in all of creation. He is utterly unique and supreme in His holiness.

As you then move out from the core of its meaning, that which peculiarly belongs to Yahweh is declared to be holy. It may or may not be moral; the shovel that was used to remove the ashes from the altar was declared holy (Ex. 27:23; 29:37), not because it is moral but because it is reserved peculiarly for Yahweh's service and nothing else. Anything else is common.

So, if Yahweh's people are declared to be holy because they were reserved peculiarly for Yahweh's service, then it is going to affect how they think, which bears on how they behave and speak and relate to others in their relationships. This is because as His image bearers they can reflect the holy character of Yahweh in ways that the articles of the tabernacle could not. Thus, a moral element is introduced to the way they think about themselves as their lives align with the character of Yahweh and they reflect the Master's holiness to the world.

The idea of holiness is then defined in two ways. Israel was definitionally and positionally holy, for they had been set aside for Yahweh's use. If they do not live like they belong to Yahweh, then they are contradicting the very nature of what Yahweh has called them to be as His redeemed kingdom of priests. If they are positionally His, then the work and character of Yahweh flows out of them, and they are functionally holy in the way that they behave and relate to others.

Thus, holiness is at its core a non-communicable attribute. Only Yahweh is God. But they are declared to be holy because they are associated with Him and are used by Him. The minute they step away from Him and His will, they become common and profane.

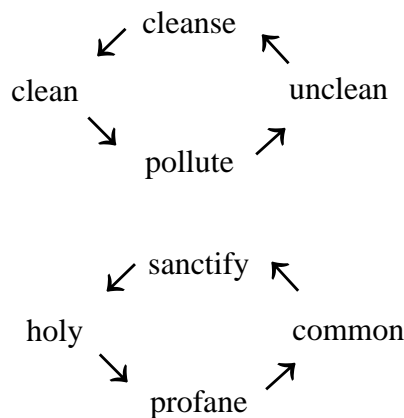
The most common way that Yahweh made His holiness visible in the Torah was through His glory, which was seen as a pillar of cloud and fire at the burning bush, on Mount Sinai, in the tabernacle, and while leading Israel through the wilderness (Deut. 4:24). Leviticus reveals that the fire of Yahweh consumed the sacrifices that He accepted (Lev. 9:23-24), along with Nadab and Abihu for their violation of the holy things (Lev. 10:1-2). His holiness could bring acceptance or rejection, depending on the faith of the individual displayed in obedience. The most emphasized and apparent aspect of Yahweh's holiness is in His righteousness and perfection. Therefore, the only way that sinners can come into the presence of Yahweh is through their sacrifices, obedience, and repentance, which cover their sins.

Leviticus makes it clear, therefore, that there are different levels of holiness through the priestly and cleansing systems. The priests, who are dedicated to Yahweh and spent their entire lives maintaining the holiness and worship of the community, have a greater access to Yahweh than the everyday Israelite. This is seen in the layout of the tabernacle. The inner room, the holy of

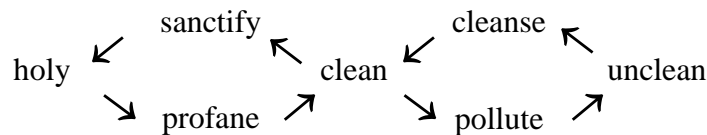
holies, was where the pillar of cloud and fire dwelt, and only the high priest could enter on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). The holy place was farther away from the presence of Yahweh, and only the priests could enter. The courtyard was still farther away, and only Israelites, the people of the covenant, could enter and only with blood atonement. The holiness of the individuals was the result of their everyday life and obedience to Yahweh’s covenant Law.

In order to maintain the purity and holiness of the tabernacle and the people of Israel, the priests were instructed “to distinguish between the holy and the common, and the unclean and the clean.” In Lev. 10:10, a double contrast is made between the “holy” and “common” on one hand and “clean” and unclean” on the other. Leviticus divides animals and bodily health into these different categories. In the Hebrew thinking, everyone and everything was one or the other.

People are divided into two groups, clean and unclean. Cleanness is the normal state of most things. People become unclean through sin or by coming into contact with other unclean things, such as blood, discharges, disease, or dead bodies. A blood atonement sacrifice or washings are necessary to return a person to a normal state of cleanness. The clean person can also be divided into two groups, common and holy. Common is also the normal state of most things. Clean things become holy when they are sanctified; holy items may also be defiled and become common. The relationship between these terms is set out in the following diagrams.³



As a common, clean person, one is either sanctified into holiness or polluted into uncleanness. When a person becomes unclean, he must make every effort to become clean again. Only those called by Yahweh can become holy. The unclean and the holy are two opposite states that must never come into contact (Lev. 7:20-21; 22:3). The diagrams above can be combined:



Uncleanness may be transmitted from unclean things by contact (Lev. 11:39-40; 14:36; 15:4-12). Holy objects make everything they touch holy (Ex. 29:37; 30:39; Lev. 6:18, 27). But cleanness is

³ These distinctions and the charts are defined by Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 19.

not transmitted to other things. All uncleanness requires washing. Those who refuse endanger themselves and the entire community (Num. 19:13, 20).

Though rituals were a big part of the purification of the Israelites, the Scriptures make it clear that holiness was not simply acquired by ritual action or moral behavior. Leviticus stresses that there are two aspects to sanctification, a divine act and human actions. Yahweh sanctifies the person He has chosen, and humans were commanded to join Yahweh in the sanctification process (Num. 16:7). The human can only sanctify another when he has divine permission from Yahweh (Lev. 21:8). The main emphasis of Leviticus is how humans can contribute to the sanctification that Yahweh has mandated. The offerings and rituals are the way that a person demonstrates faith in joining Yahweh in sanctification—not that they actually sanctify a person.⁴

Holiness is what characterizes Yahweh Himself and all that belongs to him: “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26). Anyone or anything given to Yahweh becomes holy. And keeping the Law was one of the most important duties of the people of Israel if they were to demonstrate holiness (Lev. 19; 20:7-27; Num. 15:39-40). Disobedience to Yahweh was worthy of death (Ex. 31: 14; Num. 20:12). Every Israelite had a duty to seek release from uncleanness through washing and sacrifices because uncleanness was incompatible with the holiness of Yahweh’s covenant people.

Social anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that *holy* means more than separation to divine service. It means wholeness and completeness, restoration to the full image of Yahweh as He intended humans to be. Much of Leviticus is taken up with stating the physical perfection that was required of things present in and people who entered the tabernacle. Lev. 21:17-21 list all the imperfections that keep a priest from entering the tabernacle.

“We can conclude that holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused. Another set of precepts refines on this last point. Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation. It therefore involves correct definition, discrimination and order. Under this head all the rules of sexual morality exemplify the holy. Incest and adultery (Lev. 18:6-20) are against holiness, in the simple sense of right order. Morality does not conflict with holiness, but holiness is more a matter of separating that which should be separated than of protecting the rights of husbands and brothers.”⁵

“New Testament theology makes full use of the idea of holiness. All Christians are holy, ‘saints’ in most English translations. That is, they have been called by God to be his people just as ancient Israel had been (Col. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2:9-10; cf. Exod. 19:5-6). But this state of holiness must find expression in holy living (Col. 1:22; 1 Pet. 1:15). Sanctification is expressed through obedience to the standard of teaching (Rom. 6:17-19), just as in Leviticus through obedience to the law. Peter urges his readers to make the motto of Leviticus their own: ‘Be holy, for I am holy’ (1 Pet. 1:16). The imitation of God is a theme that unites the ethics of Old and New Testaments (cf. Matt. 5:48; 1 Cor. 11:1).”⁶

⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 23.

⁵ See Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger*, p. 51-53.

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 25.

Atonement

The sin of humanity is the whole reason the book of Leviticus was written. Sin is any thought or act that is contrary to the will of Yahweh. Sin, in which humanity engages every day, creates great distance between Yahweh and other people in one's life. This sin defiles a person so that they could not enter Yahweh's presence. Yahweh is unapproachable not because of His lack of love for humanity but because of His holiness being in opposition to their sin. Yahweh is so righteous and holy that His glory would eradicate the sinner who would come into His presence. Because of the offensiveness of humanity's sin and His love for us, we are separated from His presence. Because of this separation, we need to be given a means of entering into His presence, as provided in Leviticus. The fact that Yahweh provided a way to Himself through atonement demonstrates His incredible love for humanity despite their sin and its violation of His holiness.

There were two main reasons for sacrificial blood atonements. First, according to D. J. Davies, sacrifices were concerned with restoring the relationships between Yahweh and Israel and between people within the community. The Sinai Covenant had created a fellowship characterized by life, order, and rest for Yahweh's covenant people. Outside the covenant was the realm of death, disorder, and dysfunction, from which Israel had been redeemed. Sacrifice was the principal means for remedying this disruption and for restoring harmony into the community. Yet this is only a small part of it.

The second, and main, reason is that sacrificial blood brings cleansing and sanctification (Ex. 29:36-37; Lev. 8:11-15, 23-30).⁷ "Under the Law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). Sin and disease were what defiled a person, making them no longer holy or clean. Sacrifice sanctifies a person back to a state of holiness and cleanness so that they may come into the presence of a holy God. These sacrifices provided atonement.

There are two possible meanings for *atonement*. The first is that the word comes from the Akkadian verb *kuppuru*, which means "to cleanse" or "wipe." This fits the cases where the blood of the sacrifice is smeared on the altar to cleanse it (Lev. 16:33). It may also be derived from the Hebrew word *koper*, meaning "ransom price." This is the money a condemned person can pay in order to escape death (Ex. 21:30; Prov. 6:35).⁸ Both of these meanings are seen throughout Scriptures.

The key to atonement is found in the blood of the animal, which was the life of the animal (Lev. 17:11). Since the life of the sinner is demanded as the price for sin, then a life must be offered up in the place of the sinner in order to pay the price. Thus, the life/blood of the animal is poured out onto the altar as a covering of sins. The point of the sacrifice was to remove the judgment of sin and provide atonement. This is seen most fully in the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), when the sacrifices of the two goats paid the price of sin, purged the sanctuary of the pollution of sin, and removed the guilt and defilement of sin from the community as a whole. If one failed to sacrifice for sin or uncleanness, then death was likely to occur (Ex. 32:25-35; Lev. 10; Num. 25). There is no mention, once someone died, of a sacrifice necessary to restore the holiness of the community (Num. 25:6-13; 16:36-50).

⁷ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 26.

⁸ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 28.

However, the ritual and sacrifice were not enough to sanctify the person. Only Yahweh can grant someone forgiveness and cleansing, after he has come to Him by faith, as demonstrated through the sacrifice (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31; 12:7, 8). It was the faith of the person who was willing to sacrifice their precious animals in order to restore their relationship with Yahweh that gained one true forgiveness of sins. The loss of the animal's blood was a graphic example of what sin required for atonement. The cost of the animal was how one demonstrated faith in Yahweh. A sacrifice without sacrificing is not a sacrifice.

At Mount Sinai, the whole nation became holy through the sacrifice that inaugurated the covenant. If, after this, an individual member of the covenant community became unclean due to sin, then he had to reenact the process of sanctification in order to be redeemed and brought back into the holy community of Israel.⁹ Thus the sacrifices did not save someone from eternal judgement but instead maintained their holiness and relationship with Yahweh.

Hebrews 8–10 makes the point that Christ has replaced the sacrificial system with His once-and-for-all sacrifice on the cross. Unlike the animal sacrifices of the First Testament,¹⁰ which merely covered sins, Christ's death completely atones for sin. One places his faith in Christ and His sacrifice as the object of his faith in order to be saved from eternal judgment. Daily repentance is how we maintain our holiness and relationship with Yahweh.

Structure

In Leviticus there are three ways that allow the Israelites to become clean and holy and dwell in the presence of Yahweh: the rituals (Lev. 1-7; 23-27), the priesthood (Lev. 8-10; 21-22), and the purification laws (Lev. 11-15; 18-20). All three of these categories are discussed at the beginning of Leviticus (Lev. 1-15), which addresses how one becomes holy so that he or she can enter the presence of Yahweh in worship in the tabernacle. The first includes the rituals required for sacrifices in order to gain purification (Lev. 1-7). The second is the ordination and purification of the priests so that they could serve in the tabernacle (Lev. 8-10). The third is how one maintains physical purification when facing infirmity (Lev. 11-15). The book then climaxes in the Day of Atonement, on which these three things are put into practice to purify the tabernacle and the people so that the holy Yahweh and the people could dwell together (Lev. 16-17). This purification was necessary to cleanse the people of their sins that had built up over the past year so that Yahweh could dwell with them for another year.

These three categories are then discussed a second time, in reverse order, at the end of Leviticus, which addresses how does one live out holiness in worship outside the tabernacle in community with others in the nation. The first is how one was to live morally pure concerning social justice, relationships, and sexual conduct (Lev. 18-20). The second is the standard of purity that the

⁹ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 27.

¹⁰ The titles *First and Second Testaments* are used in place of the titles *Old and New Testaments* because it is more accurate to their purpose. The use of *old* and *new* unintentionally communicates that the Old Testament is outdated and thus has no purpose, having been replaced by the New Testament. This is not the case. The Second Testament writers viewed the First Testament as the foundation for the Second, as shown by the way that they used it in their writings. Every book in the Second Testament directly quotes or makes an allusion to the First Testament—a total of 695 direct quotes and more than 4,000 allusions. Except for five First Testament books, everyone is referenced in some way in the Second Testament (see Roger Nicole, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 617). Thus, the Second Testament writers assume that their readers have a very good understanding of the First Testament when they write and use it as the basis for the truth that they are writing.

priests were to maintain in their lives as they served the Israelites (Lev. 21-22). And the third was how to observe the sacred days and festivals in the lives of the people (Lev. 23-27). These three ways form a chiasmic parallel that also emphasizes the Day of Atonement:

A Rituals: Animal sacrifices (1-7)

B Priesthood: Ordination and purification (8-10)

C Purity: Animals and infirmity (11-15)

X The Day of Atonement (16-17)

C' Purity: Moral conduct (18-20)

B' Priesthood: Standard of holy living (21-22)

A' Rituals: Sacred days and festivals (23-27)

It is important to understand that Leviticus is not just a book of laws but is all narrative of Israel's time at Mount Sinai. The history provides the setting and framework for the laws. It is the history that gives meaning and understanding to the laws. The narrative and laws are arranged in a chiasmic pattern that also emphasizes the Day of Atonement:

A Legal: The sacrifices (1:1-7:38)

B Narrative: The consecration of the priests (8:1-10:20)

C Legal: Laws of cleanness (11:1-15:33)

X Legal written as narrative: The Day of Atonement (16:1-34)

C' Legal: Conduct and festivals (17:1-24:9)

B' Narrative: Blaspheming Yahweh (24:10-23)

A' Legal: Sabbaths, vows, and tithes (25:1-27:34)

Outline

- I. Regulations Concerning Public Worship (1:1–18:34)
 - A. Laws Concerning Sacrifice (1:1–7:38)
 - B. The Consecration of the Priests (8:1–9:24)
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I. Regulations Concerning Public Worship (1:1–16:34)

The first division of Leviticus details the ritual sacrifices (Lev. 1-7), the consecration of the priests (Lev. 8-10), and the purification laws concerning diseases and discharges (Lev. 11-15), all of which climax in the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). All the material of this first division is focused on how the Israelites could become pure and holy so they might come into the presence of a holy God. All these instructions were implemented in the Day of Atonement so that they made purification for all the sins of Israel that had built up during the last year. Because of this purification of the tabernacle and Israel, Yahweh could dwell with Israel for another year.

The information provided concerning the sacrificial regulations is only enough to help the reader understand their purpose—not how to practice the rituals. Most of these practices already existed in some form in the cultures that surrounded Israel. Yahweh’s instructions to Israel were meant to teach them how His purification rites were different and what they said about Him. The modern reader, therefore, does not have enough information to duplicate these rituals. Perhaps this has not been preserved since we no longer need these rituals to enter Yahweh’s presence; He has become the promises and fulfillment of a better covenant.

A. Laws Concerning Sacrifice (1:1–7:34)

Yahweh designed the sacrificial offerings to teach the Israelites as well as to enable them to worship Him. Yahweh instituted the sacrificial system as a means to provide atonement for sin, as well as a way to demonstrate their thanksgiving to Him. Because of their sins, the people could not enter the presence of a holy and righteous Yahweh. Since the penalty for sin is death, only by something dying in their place could people enter Yahweh’s presence. However, the blood of animals could not truly take away sin—thus the need for Jesus Christ’s sacrifice. The sacrifices were, therefore, an act of obedience that demonstrated the believer’s faith and repentance. The sacrifice given in faith would then cover the sins of the Israelite until the greater sacrifice, Jesus Christ, came. The sacrificial system taught the people what was necessary to maintain and restore the believer’s communion with Yahweh and painted a picture of Christ to come.

The first three sacrifices are grouped together because they are “food offerings for Yahweh, which have a soothing aroma.” They are ordered from the most valuable to the least valuable sacrifice. The regulations for these sacrifices may have been arranged in logical order to make them easier to memorize. Each of the three sacrifices are then arranged around the sacrificial animal, so that the more valuable animals are dealt with first, before the less valuable animals. The first animal sacrifice is dealt with in the most detail. The two following animals are explained more briefly since they mostly are sacrificed in the same way as the first animal. But with all three, the law makes clear exactly what the worshiper does and what the priest does.

The last two sacrifices are grouped together because they are arranged in a similar way to each other. Here, the most important distinction is between inadvertent sins and sins of omission, or deliberate sins. Moses had previously mentioned burnt offerings in Genesis 12:7; 13:4, 18; 22; 26:25; 33:20; and 35:1-7; and peace offerings in Genesis 31:54 and 46:1. However, the purification and reparation offerings were new. Though the sin and trespass offerings have similarities to the previous three, the fact that their descriptions are structured differently shows that these two are in a class all by themselves.

The sacrificing, cleaning, and burning of an animal made for a very graphically violent and messy ritual that would have also cost the worshiper a lot financially and emotionally. The purpose of this was to teach Israel that sin was also violent and messy, and exacted a heavy price on people's lives due to its consequences. The tangible nature of the sacrifices would make Israel more aware of the nature of their sin and what it cost to make it right, hopefully discouraging them from treating sin lightly and desiring to avoid it at all costs to maintain their holiness.

These rituals also have many minute and specific details that Yahweh required the worshiper to carry out to the letter. If they did not, then their sacrifices were not accepted and, depending on their heart attitude, may have resulted in death. Why was all this detail so important? The point was that one showed love to Yahweh by paying careful attention to the details.

“...Care and attention to detail are indispensable to the conduct of divine worship. God is more important, more distinguished, worthy of more respect than any man; therefore we should follow his injunctions to the letter, if we respect him.”¹¹

We expect the same thing from those who say they love us. If your loved ones hold a birthday party for you and just haphazardly throw it together without thought, then you feel hurt. However, if they have paid attention to all the tiniest details of the decorations, food, and activities for the day in relation to the preferences and wishes you have shared over the years, then you feel very special and loved. It is the same with Yahweh. Our intentionality, planning, and attention to detail are how we show Him that we have been paying attention to Him and that we do care to please Him.

1:1-2 The tent of meeting refers to the tabernacle. The fact that Yahweh called to Moses *from* the tent of meeting rather than *in* the tent of meeting, like in Num. 1:1, connects back to Exodus and Moses' inability to enter the tabernacle after it was built and the glory of Yahweh had entered it. Yet Moses was able to enter the glory of Yahweh on Mount Sinai and in the pre-tabernacle tent of meeting. The reason he could not do so at the end of Exodus and the beginning of Leviticus is because of the sin of the people with the golden calf. Because of the tabernacle being the dwelling place of Yahweh with His people and Moses, as their representative, being unable to enter the tabernacle, the people are not able to enter because their sin had violated the holiness of Yahweh. Even though He had forgiven them, they still could not enter His presence because of their sin. There had been no atonement made. Leviticus will continue the story with instructions on the sacrificial system and the holiness Code. Only after they put this into practice will they be able to enter the tabernacle and His presence and then begin to make their journey to the Promised Land together (Lev. 16; Num. 1:1).

Yahweh's first instruction to Moses concerning the sacrificial system was that all sacrifices had to be of domesticated animals from their own flock and herd. According to Deut. 14:5, wild game could be eaten if correctly slaughtered, but it could not be offered as a sacrifice. The reason is that an essential part of sacrifice was its costliness. Therefore, it had to be an animal that you owned and would cost you to lose; a sacrifice without true sacrifice is not a sacrifice (2 Sam. 24:24). Most animals that the Israelites had provided milk and wool. To kill animals in order to eat meat was a rare luxury in the First Testament times for all except the wealthy, which was a very small percentage. And when an animal was killed for food, all parts of the animal were used for different purposes. Thus, watching an entire animal be consumed in the flames would have

¹¹ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 128.

caused anyone to cringe—much like smashing your perfectly good car with a sledge hammer. This would have been a true sacrifice and act of devotion to Yahweh. This would also create a need to trust Yahweh, that He would sustain the vitality of the herd.

The Burnt Offering

1:3-9 The first offering was the burnt offering. Yahweh required that the animal be perfect, without blemish. If cleanness and holiness were about being whole, then the offering that restored this wholeness to the worshiper must also be whole, without defect. For this sacrifice, the animal must be a male (this was not true for all sacrifices). The first animal used as the example for this offering is the bull. This was the animal required for the whole nation for the morning and evening offerings and for the wealthy.

The worshiper was to bring his offering into the courtyard of the tabernacle for Yahweh's acceptance. Just inside the gate to the tabernacle and off to the right side of the gate, the worshiper then laid his hands on the animal's head. The laying of hands on the animal is a weak translation. "Press" would be a better translation (Isa. 59:16; Ezek. 24:2; 30:6; Amos 5:19). The worshiper was to lean on the animal. This may indicate both that the sins of the worshiper were symbolically transferred to the sacrifice (Lev. 16:21; 24:14) and that the animal was taking the place of the worshiper. The worshiper may have even sung a song and prayed a prayer. This laying on of hands is also associated with praying (Lev. 16:21; Deut. 21:6-9), for sacrifice without prayer is useless.

Then the worshiper had to kill the animal on the north side of the altar. He had to ensure that all the animal's blood was drained out, for this was the life of the animal. The priest collected the blood in a basin as it drained. Then both the priest and the worshiper offered the blood to Yahweh, perhaps by saying a prayer as the priest lifted the basin up to Yahweh. Then the worshiper chopped up the animal, and the priest burned the animal piece by piece on the altar. First, the head and the fat were burned on the altar, while the worshiper washed the hind legs, organs, and intestines with the water from the bronze laver to remove any bodily waste. Then the priest burned the rest of the animal except for the skin (Lev. 7:8).

1:10-17 The option of a lamb or bird was allowed for those who could not afford the higher cost of a bull. In this way, Yahweh allowed each Israelite to offer what was a true sacrifice. The heart of the person and his or her faith in Yahweh determined this sacrifice. The instructions for the lamb were the same as those for the bull.

With bird sacrifices, the pigeon or turtledove could be male or female, and the priest did all the work. The priest killed the bird by removing its head and laying it on the altar. The priest then drained the blood out on the base of the altar. The feathers and entrails were removed and were thrown into the ashpit, which was separate from the altar. The bird was then separated into two halves by its wings and placed on the altar for burning.

The characteristic feature of a burnt offering was that the whole animal, except for the skin, was burned on the altar (Lev. 1:6; 7:8). This was a true whole offering sacrifice to Yahweh since nothing of the meat was saved for consumption. The worshiper was actively involved in the sacrifice of his own animal, working in partnership with the holy priest. He was actively

involved in worship and singing. He knew that something spiritually significant was happening, and his relationship with Yahweh was profoundly affected through the sacrifice.¹²

Because the Israelite knew the purpose of a burnt offering so well, it is without explanation in Leviticus. The phrase “to make atonement on his behalf” (Lev. 1:4) is the clearest clue for the purpose of the burnt offering. The burnt offering does not remove sin or change the worshiper’s sinful nature, but it makes fellowship with Yahweh possible (Num. 15:24; 28; 2 Sam. 24:25; Job. 1:5).¹³ And it was not the sacrifice that brought forgiveness but the faith of the worshiper who gave the sacrifice that brought forgiveness.

The animal became a substitutionary death that received the wrath of Yahweh and the penalty for sin on behalf of the worshiper. It propitiated the wrath of Yahweh against sin, for the sacrificial aroma soothed Yahweh, not humans. Sacrifice was the means whereby a peaceful existence between a holy God and a sinful human could be maintained. And the violation of the rules for performing the animal sacrifice meant that the sacrifice would not be accepted (Lev. 7:18; 22:23, 25, 27). If then the animal was the worshiper’s substitute, then they were sacrificing their entire self to Yahweh. This was an act of allegiance whereby they were entirely owned by Yahweh, ransomed from death.

The priests were required to offer the burnt sacrifice every morning and evening on behalf of the entire nation as a base sacrifice for all other sacrifices made. The daily use of the burnt offering in the worship of the tabernacle was a constant reminder of humanity’s sinfulness and Yahweh’s holiness. When different sacrifices were offered at the same time, purification offerings were offered before burnt offerings (Lev. 9; Num. 6:11; 2 Chr. 29:20-30).

Christ fulfilled this by becoming our burnt offering. His entire life was consumed by the wrath of Yahweh and by death as the penalty for sin. And He only had to die once in order to make atonement for sins (Heb. 9:11-14; 10:1-5,14). Therefore, He became a greater sacrifice who was able to save us completely. Thus, when we accept His sacrifice, we pledge our allegiance to Him and now belong to Him.

The Grain Offering

2:1-10 The official daily burnt offering was always followed by the required grain offering (Num. 28; Josh. 22:23, 29; Judg. 13:19, 23; 1 Kgs. 8:64; 2 Kgs. 16:13, 15). The worshiper was to offer the best of his grain, which could be raw flour or baked into loaves. He was then to mix olive oil in with the unleavened loaves or the raw flour and then put frankincense on it. It was presented to the priest, who took a handful of the mixture of flour and all the incense and burned it as a memorial portion. The rest of the loaves or raw flour was given to the priest to take home and eat. Because the priests served the people and had no means of providing for themselves, they were completely dependent upon Yahweh for providing for them. Thus, some of the sacrifices that Yahweh required from the people prescribed a portion going to the priests.

2:11-13 Yeast and honey were prohibited (Ex. 23:18; 34:25). The use of yeast was forbidden at Passover (Ex. 12:15; 13:3, 7) and with sacrifices (Ex. 23:18; 34:25). Yet the loaves of the Firstfruits festival contained yeast (Lev. 23:17, 20). The Bible gives no reason for why yeast and

¹² See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 55.

¹³ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 57.

honey were forbidden. Most scholars say it is because yeast and honey cause fermentation, which suggests corruption since they cause decay and rotting.¹⁴

Every grain offering was to be seasoned with salt. Salt prevents decay and rotting, though there is nothing here to suggest this meaning. Lev. 2:13 calls it the salt of Yahweh's covenant. Salt is connected with covenants on two occasions in the Bible (Num. 18:19; 2 Chr. 13:5). Salt could not be destroyed by fire, time, or anything in the ancient world. Adding salt reminded the worshiper that the covenant was an eternal covenant.¹⁵ According to Deut. 26, the worshiper had to acknowledge Yahweh's covenant mercies towards him in bringing him into the Promised Land. The worshiper was returning to Yahweh some of the agricultural produce.

2:14-16 At harvest time, a special roast grain or ground meal was encouraged. This would also have olive oil mixed in and frankincense placed on top.

The grain offering was an offering of the works of the worshiper being offered to Yahweh in worship. It also was an acknowledgement and thanks offering of the worshiper that Yahweh had provided him with his grain. It acted as a tribute offering of submission to Yahweh, a commitment of oneself and one's works to Yahweh, as well as a willingness to keep the law (Rom. 12:1-2; Heb. 13:15-16).

Through Christ's fulfillment of the burnt offering, we can now present our works to Yahweh as an act of worship (Rom. 12:1), acknowledging that everything we have comes from Him—to sacrificially give our time and money to Yahweh as a tribute and thanks offering to Him, to dedicate our lives to the expansion of His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

The Peace Offering

3:1-17 The peace offering was an optional offering of a perfect male or female cow, lamb, or goat. It could not be a bird since birds do not make much of a meal. The worshiper was to press his hands onto the animal and then kill it at the entrance to the tabernacle courtyard. The priest then splashed the blood of the animal on the side of the altar. The fat covering the organs and intestines, the kidneys, and the long lobe of the liver were burned on the altar. In the case of the fat-tailed sheep, the fat of the tail was burned as well. The priests were given the breast, the right thigh, and the skin of the animal. The rest belonged to the worshiper to eat as a feast with his family and friends (Deut. 12:7).

“The Israelites were not to eat the fat of this sacrifice but to offer it to God on the altar. This may have symbolized that God was worthy of the best since the ancients regarded the fat of an animal as its best part. Another explanation is that since the Old Testament used the kidneys and entrails to represent the seat of human emotions (cf. Job 19:27; Ps. 16:7; Jer. 4:14; 12:2), these parts represented the worshiper's best and deepest emotions. This view finds support in the fact that Israelites offered the peace offering in intrinsically emotional situations, when they thanked God or requested from Him.”¹⁶

Through this offering, Yahweh, the worshiper, and the priest were all eating of the same animal. The point is that the worshiper was acknowledging their desire for peace and fellowship with Yahweh and His covenant community. The Hebrew word for *peace* means health, prosperity,

¹⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 71.

¹⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 71.

¹⁶ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Leviticus*, p. 16.

contentment, and peace with Yahweh. This was a way of acknowledging a great act of Yahweh's provision in one's life and sharing that with friends and family through a meal that had been offered to Yahweh. This was, therefore, a meal of peace and fellowship.

Christ fulfilled this offering by becoming the sacrifice that brought peace between us and Yahweh, allowing fellowship with the Father and His covenant community. We can honor the spirit of this offering by having festivals (meals) where the focus is the proclamation of the goodness of Yahweh in our lives to those in His covenant community.

The Purification Offering

4:1-2 The purification offering was a required offering, although according to Num. 28-29, it was offered less frequently than the burnt and grain offerings. Unlike the burnt and grain offerings, the material burnt on the altar is relatively unimportant. Many translations and commentators translate the Hebrew word *hatta't* as "sin offering." Yet this translation obscures the precise function of this sacrifice. It does deal with sin and its consequences, but so did the burnt offering. But here it is not specifically about making one right with Yahweh, as was the burnt offering, but rather it is about purifying the worshiper of the defilement that sin brings. Even though one may no longer, because of the mercy Yahweh, have to suffer for their crimes, this does not mean they are not defiled and tainted by the crime. The purification offering cleansed and purified the worshiper and the tabernacle so that Yahweh could dwell with them once again.¹⁷ If there is no purification, then death will follow.

"Purification is the main element in the purification [sin] sacrifice. Sin not only angers God and deprives him of his due, it also makes his sanctuary unclean. A holy God cannot dwell amid uncleanness. The purification offering purifies the place of worship, so that God may be present among his people."¹⁸

The purification offering dealt with unintentional sins, which included sins done by mistake, in error, through oversight or ignorance, through lack of consideration, or by carelessness. That is, this sacrifice covered sins that sprang from the weakness of the flesh (Num. 15:27-29). The most important feature of this offering is the sprinkling of the blood on the altar or the veil of the holy of holies.

4:3-12 This offering is arranged not by the type of animal sacrificed but by what group the worshiper was a part of. Because the priest was held to a high standard of morality and represented the community, if he sinned, then the community was guilty of sin. The priest was required to offer a perfect male bull for his sin at the entrance of the tabernacle courtyard. He was to press his hands on the bull and then kill it before Yahweh. The blood was to be collected in a basin, and some of it was taken into the holy place. Then he was to sprinkle it with his finger seven times onto the veil of the holy of holies. He was then to take some of the blood and smear it on the horns of the bronze altar and pour the rest out on the side of the altar. The priest was then to take the fat of the bull, and the part surrounding the organs, the two kidneys, and the protruding lobe of the liver, and burn it on the altar. Then the rest of the animal was taken outside the camp and burned beside the ash heap. The idea of being outside the camp is symbolic

¹⁷ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 88-89.

¹⁸ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 89.

of being outside of a relationship with Yahweh. Thus, the sin of the people is removed from them and from their relationship with Yahweh.

“The priests were to be the teachers of the people (Deut. 33:10) and therefore had to be an example especially in their private lives; and the high priest, who stood at the head of the priests, had to exhibit in his life the ideal of a holy life to which all could look up. The high priest is the representative of the nation and its ideal. So long as he is pure and spotless, all Israel fulfilled its obligations through its representative. When however, the high priest is tainted through sin and becomes unworthy of representing the nation, all Israel stands guilty before God.”¹⁹

4:13-21 The whole congregation was not all the people of Israel but only the heads or leaders that represented the people. The assembly are the gathering people that the leaders represent. When the assembly became aware of the sin of the congregation, they were to offer a perfect bull as a purification offering. The bull was then sacrificed and offered in the same way as the animal sacrifice for the priests.

4:22-26 If a leader in the community sinned unintentionally, then he was to offer a perfect male goat as a purification offering. The goat was killed in the same way as the animal sacrifice for the congregation (Lev. 4:13-21). But for the leader the blood of the goat was smeared on the horns of the bronze altar, since he was not granted access to the holy place in the tabernacle.

4:27-35 If a common person sinned unintentionally, then he was to offer a perfect female goat or female lamb as a purification offering. And just like for the leader, the blood was smeared on the horns of the altar. Only the fat was burned, and the priest was allowed to eat the rest.

A wider variety of animals was allowed for the purification offering. However, the male lamb and ram were not allowed, which were most common in the burnt offering. Though female lambs were allowed and goats were most common, neither was allowed for the burnt offering.

“The purification [sin] offering dealt with the pollution caused by sin. If sin polluted the land, it defiled particularly the house where God dwelt. The seriousness of pollution depended on the seriousness of the sin, which in turn related to the status of the sinner. If a private citizen sinned, his action polluted the sanctuary only to a limited extent. Therefore the blood of the purification offering was only smeared on the horns of the altar of burnt sacrifice. If, however, the whole nation sinned or the holiest member of the nation, the high priest, sinned, this was more serious. The blood had to be taken inside the tabernacle and sprinkled on the veil and the altar of incense. Finally over the period of a year the sins of the nation could accumulate to such an extent that they polluted even the holy of holies, where God dwelt. If he was to continue to dwell among his people, this too had to be cleansed in the annual day of atonement ceremony (see Lev. 16).”²⁰

5:1-13 The purification offering could be for sin in general or for purifying someone of uncleanness after childbirth (Lev. 12:6), after healing from a skin disease (Lev. 14:29), or after a bodily discharge (Lev. 15:15). It was also used in the dedication of the priests (Lev. 8:14), the altar (Num. 7:16), the Levites (Num. 8:8), or the completion of a Nazirite vow (Num. 6:14). The reasons for these sacrifices are not totally clear but seem to focus mostly on the sins of omission.

¹⁹ David Hoffman. *Das Buch Leviticus*, pp. 176-177.

²⁰ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 96.

The abstaining from unclean things communicates the idea of how much Yahweh desires the people to remain pure and holy. The need for a sacrifice when they became unclean communicates how important this was to Yahweh.

Christ fulfilled this sacrifice by making purification for our sins so that we might enter the presence of Yahweh and that He might dwell within us (Heb. 4:14-16). Still, we continue to sin, and that defilement builds up in us over time. No, we do not need to offer continually sacrifices, but we do need to continually confess our sin and claim the blood of Christ. We need to also pursue a life of holiness in our thoughts, words, and deeds in order to not abuse the purification offering made by Christ.

The Reparation Offering

5:14-16 This offering is often called the trespass offering, but that is not totally accurate. Most of the offerings dealt with trespasses. The emphasis here is on restoring to someone what was taken or violated (Lev. 5:16). Not only does sin make us defiled and guilty before Yahweh, but it also damages others and takes away from them. This sacrifice was meant to restore back to Yahweh, the priests, or others what had been taken or damaged by the worshiper.

The worshiper was to bring a ram or the value of the ram converted into shekels to the tabernacle. Some commentators say that it was just the latter. With the reparation offering, there was no sprinkling of blood like there was with the purification offering. There may have been a pressing on of hands onto the animal (Num. 5:7). As with the burnt offering, the blood was thrown on the base of the altar. The fat and entrails were burnt on the altar. The priests were allowed to cook and eat the flesh in the holy place.

In the first case, this offering was required if someone trespassed against Yahweh's sacred property. The word *trespass* is used of many serious sins in the Bible: adultery (Num. 5:12, 27), idolatry (Num. 31:16; Ezek. 20:27), marrying pagan foreigners (Ezra 10:2, 10), stealing consecrated spoils of war (Josh. 7:1), or a non-priest taking the role of a priest (2 Chr. 26:16, 18). Here, the worshiper must bring the ram converted into shekels plus 20% given to the priests.

5:17-6:7 The second case was if the person were ignorant that what he had done was wrong (Lev. 5:17-19). The third case was when one had taken something from another and, when they were questioned, they swore falsely about what they had done (Lev. 6:1-7).

“The sacrificial system therefore presents different models or analogies to describe the effects of sin and the way of remedying them. The burnt offering uses a personal picture: of man the guilty sinner who deserves to die for his sin and of the animal dying in his place. God accepts the animal as a ransom for man. The sin [purification] offering uses a medical model: sin makes the world so dirty that God can no longer dwell there. The blood of the animal disinfects the sanctuary in order that God may continue to be present with his people. The reparation offering presents a commercial picture of sin. Sin is a debt which man incurs against God. The debt is paid through the offered animal.”²¹

“Although atonement for sin was provided in each of the blood offerings, atonement was not their basic purpose. Israel's initial relationship with God as His redeemed people had been established through the Passover sacrifice on the night of their deliverance from Egypt. The

²¹ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 111.

offerings presented at the Tabernacle were the means of maintaining that relationship between the Israelites and their God.”²²

Even though Christ fulfilled the sacrificial system, to truly love Yahweh and others means that we should desire to make reparations for the way that we have wronged others. We should be willing to give back and then some what we have taken from them to the best of our ability. If the atonement of Christ means making us whole again, then we should seek to make others whole when we have robbed them of this.

Sacrificial Instructions for the Priests

The principal focus of this section is the eating of sacrificial meat—who may eat what and where. In most cases, only the priests could only eat the meat of the sacrifices, except for the peace offering from which the people got a portion. Thus, the peace offering is dealt with last. In this section, the sacrifices are ordered by their frequency rather than by theological significance.

6:8-13 The main concern of the burnt offering is that the fire should never go out. The reason this is important is not given. Theologian John Calvin says that the altar was lit by Yahweh with fire from heaven (Lev. 9:24; 2 Chr. 7:1).²³ C. F. Keil says it is because the burnt offering was a perpetual symbol of the uninterrupted worship of Yahweh.²⁴ W. H. Gispen says that it represented the continual consecration of the people to Yahweh.²⁵ Gordon J. Wenham adds to Keil and Gispen that as a propitiatory sacrifice, the fire served as a reminder of the constant need for atonement.²⁶ For the Christian, the point is to keep the divine fire of the Holy Spirit burning in us through the reading of the Word, prayer, and fellowship with Yahweh’s covenant people.

6:14-7:21 There is very little added here from Lev 2-5. The grain, purification, and reparation offerings were called the most holy (Lev. 6:10, 17, 25; 7:6). This means that they were sacrifices that only the priest could eat. Likewise, all the grain and meat must be eaten. Nothing offered to Yahweh must go to waste.

7:22-38 Fat may not be eaten. If the animal dies of natural causes, it may not be sacrificed because it is no longer a costly sacrifice and is defiled with death. Still, it is not to be wasted. The fat may be used for any purpose except for eating. The meat is allowed to be eaten, but the person who consumes it becomes unclean and must immediately wash. Deuteronomy prefers that the meat be given to the resident foreigner or be sold to outside foreigners in order to maintain Israel’s holiness (Deut. 4:21).

The blood also is never allowed to be consumed (Gen. 9:4; 1 Sam. 14:33). This restriction is given for a few reasons. First, blood can carry a lot of diseases, and so it is not safe. Second, the life of the animal is in the blood and is given for the atonement of sin (Lev. 17:11). Blood is symbolic of life because it is the most essential thing for life and is the most physically visual representation of life. It was used for the atonement of sins in that an innocent life was offered in place of a sinful life to cancel the debt of sin that leads to death. Thus, the blood is sacred and should not be used for something common because the powerful meaning of blood as atonement is lost when it is mixed with what is common. Third, because blood was associated with life,

²² Samuel J. Schultz. *Leviticus: God Among His People*, p. 67.

²³ See John Calvin. *Commentaries on the Four Books Moses*, p. 364.

²⁴ See C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch*, p. 318.

²⁵ See W. H. Gispen. *Het Boek Leviticus*, p. 104.

²⁶ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 120.

many tribes would drink the blood in order to gain the power or life of the animal. The reason humans need atonement is their desire to be in control and to gain life and blessing outside the will of Yahweh. In consuming the blood, one would be using what is meant for atonement to instead gain more power outside the will of Yahweh.

B. The Consecration of the Priests (8:1–9:24)

This section details the fulfillment of Yahweh's command in Ex. 28-29 on how to anoint and ordain Aaron and his sons as priests to serve in the tabernacle. Almost every verse in Lev. 8 is a quotation or adaptation of the commands given in Ex. 29. This emphasizes the fact that the commands Yahweh gave for the ordination of the priests in Ex. 28-29 were faithfully obeyed here. Lev. 9 more freely summarizes the laws on sacrifice in Lev. 1-7. Likewise, the phrase "as Yahweh commanded Moses" and similar phrases appear with great repetition in this section (Lev. 7:8; 8:4, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 29, 34, 36, 9:6, 7, 10, 21; 10:7, 13, 15). Thus, Moses' strict adherence to Yahweh's will is emphasized. After obedience to these commands, the glory of Yahweh appeared to all the people (Lev. 9:23).

The custom of the ancient Near East nomadic tribes was that the father of the household functioned as the priest for the family. With the larger nations, only fathers in certain families had the right to be priests and enter the temples. The intent of Yahweh was that the firstborn of each family would serve as the priest for the family and have the right to enter the tabernacle. However, the Israelites lost this right with their sin of worshiping the golden calf (Ex. 32-33). The Levites were now the only ones to have this privilege because they joined Moses in standing against the golden calf.

8:1-5 Yahweh commanded Moses to assemble Aaron's family and the congregation of Israel. Most likely, the elders from the tribes assembled before the tabernacle. The consecration of Aaron's family marked them as separate from the rest of the community, as holy unto Yahweh. Since Aaron was the representative of the people before Yahweh, this ceremony was carried out in public for all the people to witness.

The centrality of Moses is the focus here as he ordained Aaron and his sons. Rarely did Yahweh address Aaron alone. Usually it was through Moses or with Moses. A command from Moses was treated as if it were from Yahweh. When Moses was satisfied with Aaron's behavior, it was assumed that Yahweh was also (Lev. 10:19-20). Since Aaron had no predecessor as high priest, he had to be ordained by Moses.²⁷ In Lev. 8, Moses acted as a priest. On the other hand, Aaron and his sons took on the jobs assigned to the laity. Once Aaron had been ordained, Lev. 9 describes a very similar sequence except that Aaron took center stage as the newly ordained high priest.

8:6-13 Moses then brought Aaron and his sons to be ceremonially washed to purify them so that they could enter the tabernacle. The clothes that the priests wore are detailed in Ex. 28 and were intended to communicate Aaron's families' position and relationship to Yahweh. Moses then anointed the tabernacle, everything in the tabernacle, the altar, the wash basin, and Aaron and his sons to prepare them for the sacrifices that were to be made. The anointing follows the instructions given in Ex. 40:9-11.

8:14-36 Moses, as the mediator of the covenant, performed the sacrificial ceremony. If Yahweh was going to be present in the tabernacle, then it had to be purified of sin and defilement. The sacrifice follows exactly the instructions given in Ex. 29:10-14. Moses functioned as a priest and presented three offerings: a young ox as a purification offering (Lev. 8:14-17), a ram as a burnt offering (Ex. 29:15-18; Lev. 8:18-21), and another ram as a peace offering (Ex. 29:19-21; Lev. 8:22-30). Moses also applied blood from the peace offering to Aaron's ear, hand, and foot. The

²⁷ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 132.

sprinkling of the priests and their garments with blood and oil represented the future atoning blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit's power.

So here, the blood linked Yahweh and Aaron, showing that Aaron was now Yahweh's representative among Israel (Lev 8:13). The anointing with blood of Aaron's toe, thumb, and ear is a reference to the part referring to the whole. And the anointing with blood on the right-hand side was considered the more important and favored side (Gen. 48:17-19; Matt. 25:34, 41).

“...the *ear*, because the priest was always to hearken to the word and commandment of God; the *hand*, because he was to discharge the priestly functions properly; and the *foot*, because he was to walk correctly in the sanctuary.”²⁸

“In this section one doctrine emerges very clearly: the universality and pervasiveness of sin. The men chosen to minister to God in the tabernacle pollute the tabernacle and therefore purification offerings have to be offered. Their clothes and bodies are stained with sin and they must be smeared with blood to purify them. These sacrifices are not offered just once; they have to be repeated, because sin is deep-rooted in human nature and often recurs. There is no once-for-all cleansing known to the OT. It is the incorrigibility of the human heart that these ordination ceremonies bring into focus [cf. Ps. 14:3].”²⁹

9:1-24 Now that Aaron and his family were consecrated before Yahweh, they could make sacrifices for the sins of the people. For seven days, sacrifices had to be offered to purge Aaron's sins in the ordination service. Yet in the first services that Aaron conducts, he offered sacrifices for both his sins and those of the nation's. Aaron first offered a purification offering and then a burnt offering for himself. Then he presented four sacrifices on behalf of the people. A goat purification offering to cleanse the altar, a calf and lamb burnt offering, a grain offering, and an ox and ram peace offering. This was a public declaration that He and the people were sinners and needed forgiveness. The glory of Yahweh appearing before the people and consuming the sacrifices in His fire demonstrated to the people that He had accepted their sacrifices and repentance and would thus dwell with them. On three occasions Yahweh showed His approval of a burnt offering by sending fire down to consume it (Judg. 13:15-20; 2 Chr. 7:1-3; 1 Kgs. 18:38).

“This chapter brings out very clearly the purpose and character of OT worship. All the pomp and ceremony served one end: the appearance of the glory of God.”³⁰

“The pattern was hereby established: by means of the priests' proper entry into the tabernacle, the nation was blessed. The next chapter (Lev 10) gives a negative lesson of the same truth in the example of Nadab and Abihu: the blessing of God's people will come only through obedience to the divine pattern.”³¹

²⁸ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch*, p. 2:340.

²⁹ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, pp. 144-45.

³⁰ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 151.

³¹ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 330.

C. The Death of Nadab and Abihu (10:1-20)

The narrative that follows emphasizes how seriously Yahweh took the sacrificial ritual of the atonement of the sins of the nation. Those who represent Him and lead the nation He especially holds to a higher standard in the way that they conduct themselves. The point here is that sin should be taken seriously—and especially when sin is being atoned for.

Throughout Lev. 8-9, the obedience of Moses and Aaron is continually emphasized (Lev. 8:4, 9, 13, 21, 29, 36; 9:5, 7, 10, 21). Yet Lev. 10 begins with no directives from Yahweh. It immediately begins with Aaron's sons taking their own initiative. Only after their judgment does the narrative return to the obedience patterns seen in Lev. 8-9. The return to the pattern of divine directives from Yahweh and obedience gives the reader a sense of security and normality reinforced with the closing statement "Moses was satisfied" (Lev. 10:20).

10:1-7 The very day after the consecration of Aaron and his family, two of his sons violated the will of Yahweh by offering "strange fire" in the tabernacle. The exact nature of Nadab and Abihu's offense is not detailed in the text. The strange fire seems to have been an incense offering presented apart from Yahweh's command at a time other than the morning or evening sacrifices. The judgment for their sins was not just for violating the ritual but for their attitude and blatant disregard of Yahweh's commands on how to conduct themselves in His house. Just as Adam and Eve's sin in the garden, they declared themselves self-autonomous of Yahweh's will in His own tabernacle. This was especially grievous to Yahweh since they were responsible for offering sacrifices to atone for this kind of sin in the first place. The same fire that had sanctified Aaron's priesthood and brought blessings now brought judgment and destruction on Nadab and Abihu because they had not sanctified Yahweh.

"If we reflect how holy a thing God's worship is, the enormity of the punishment will by no means offend us. Besides, it was necessary that their religion should be sanctioned at its very commencement; for if God had suffered the sons of Aaron to transgress with impunity, they would have afterwards carelessly neglected the whole law. This, therefore, was the reason for such great severity, that the priests should anxiously watch against all profanation."³²

Moses responded with a word from Yahweh (Lev. 10:3). His words could loosely be paraphrased as "the closer a person gets to Yahweh, the more attention he must pay to holiness and the glory of Yahweh."³³ Yahweh is a holy God, and the only way one can be close to Him is by making himself more holy as he gets closer to Him. Other than Moses, Nadab and Abihu, in the tabernacle, were as close to Yahweh as humans could get.

Yahweh then had other Levites carry the bodies of Nadab and Abihu outside the camp. After the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, the narrative reverts to the usual command/compliance pattern. Yahweh did not forbid Aaron to mourn the loss of his sons, but He did forbid Aaron from mourning the judgment executed on his sons. Aaron did not reply to Moses partially due to his loss and also to his understanding of Yahweh's righteous judgment.

"Eleazar and Ithamar replaced their older brothers, Nadab and Abihu, in a way similar to the way Judah and Levi replaced their older brothers, Reuben and Simeon (Gen. 49:2-7). In both families, Jacob's and Aaron's, the sins of the firstborn and secondborn resulted in God

³² John Calvin cited by Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, pp. 156-57.

³³ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 156.

passing over them for blessing. They disqualified themselves from some of the inheritance that could have been theirs had they remained faithful.”³⁴

10:8-11 The fact that this was the only time Yahweh spoke directly to Aaron highlights the importance of what was said. Why Yahweh thought it was important to remind Aaron and his family to abstain from alcohol is not clear. It could be that Nadab and Abihu were drunk when they offered the strange fire, or it could have been to keep Aaron from resorting to alcohol as a coping mechanism. Or it may be that it was customary to comfort mourners and others in distress with alcohol in order to cheer them up (Prov. 31:6-7). Yahweh here may have also been reassuring Aaron that he still had a part to play in teaching Israel the way of holiness.

10:12-20 The priestly family was commanded to finish the eating of the sacrifice in order to finish the ritual on behalf of the nation. However, Aaron refused because in light of the judgment on his sons, he did not feel worthy to finish eating the sacrifice offered to Yahweh. This answer was acceptable to Moses because Aaron’s heart was in the right place, and Aaron realized the whole point of both the sacrifice and the judgment. Yahweh is more gracious with those who fear Him and make mistakes than He is with those who do not fear Him as they should.

³⁴ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Leviticus*, p. 34.

D. Clean and Unclean Animals (11:1-47)

The following five chapters (Lev. 11-15) pick up the idea introduced in Lev. 10:10 and make a distinction between the holy and the profane, the clean and the unclean, and explain what uncleanness means. These chapters provide the essential background for understanding Lev. 16 with the cleansing of the nation on the Day of Atonement.

“The uncleanness laws start with uncleanness that is permanent: that are associated with various animals and food (ch. 11). Then they deal with the uncleanness of childbirth, which may last up to eighty days (ch. 12). Chs. 13 and 14 deal with uncleanness of indefinite duration; it all depends how long the serious skin disease persists. Finally, ch. 15 deals with discharges associated with reproduction, pollutions which usually only affect a person for up to a week. Whatever the explanation of the order of the material within chs. 11-15, these laws illuminate the day of atonement rituals, which are designed to cleanse the tabernacle ‘of the uncleanness of the Israelites’ (16:16). Without these chapters we should be at a loss to know what was the purpose of the ceremonies described in ch. 16.”³⁵

“Uncleanness was not all the same under the Old Covenant; there were degrees of uncleanness. The uncleanness that certain defiling things caused required simple purification, for example, washing and waiting a short time. The uncleanness that other defiling things caused required more involved rites.”³⁶

“Two different situations caused uncleanness: moral transgression and ceremonial defilement. Moral transgressions caused spiritual defilement (moral uncleanness). However ceremonial defilement (ritual uncleanness) did not necessarily mean that the defiled person had sinned. Some practices that resulted in ceremonial uncleanness were not morally wrong in themselves such as childbearing. Therefore we must not think ‘sinful’ whenever we read ‘unclean.’”³⁷

The author begins with the distinction between clean and unclean animals. Only the animals that were considered clean could be eaten. And only a smaller group of them could be sacrificed as explained in Lev. 1-7. This is not a comprehensive list, but a list of the animals that were common to the Israelites. Many of the terms for birds and reptiles is uncertain. In fact, only 40% of the meanings have been discovered.

11:1-8 Concerning the land animals, only the animals that chewed the cud and had a split hoof were considered clean animals and were allowed to be eaten (e.g., sheep, goats, and cattle). The exceptions to this were the camel, rock badger, hare, and pig. Other mammals were unclean and were not to be eaten (e.g., donkeys, lions, and bears).

“Apparently the technical definition of chewing the cud that we use today is not what the Hebrews understood by chewing the cud. Today we use this term to describe animals that do not initially chew their food thoroughly but swallow it and later regurgitate it and then chew it thoroughly. Some of the animals described in Leviticus as chewing the cud do not do that (e.g., camels [i.e., one-humped dromedaries], conies [i.e., rock hyraxes], hares). However,

³⁵ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 216.

³⁶ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Leviticus*, p. 36.

³⁷ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Leviticus*, p. 42.

these animals do appear to chew their food thoroughly, so this may be what the Israelites thought of as chewing the cud.”³⁸

11:9-12 Only the fish having both fins and scales were considered clean for eating.

11:13-19 From among the birds, Yahweh forbade 20 different varieties as being unclean. It seems that the feeding habits of these birds (flesh eaters) are what made them unclean.

11:20-23 All winged insects that also walked on all fours were considered unclean. The only swarming insects considered clean were those with jointed legs that hopped on the land. The locust of any kind, the bald locust of any kind, the cricket of any kind, and the grasshopper of any kind were all clean.

11:24-28 The rest of this chapter addresses the issue of human contact with unclean animals. Only dead animals polluted human beings, yet no living unclean animal did. Touching the carcass of a dead animal rendered a person unclean. And all dead animals were unclean unless they had been sacrificed ritually. This is because death is a part of the curse and therefore not natural. The people must wash themselves after contact.

11:29-47 Other swarming animals, such as mice and lizards, were unclean and may not be eaten. If they were found dead inside a vessel, the vessel became unclean and must be destroyed or purified. Anything upon which a dead animal fell would also become unclean. The only exception was if the animal fell into a cistern, the cistern did not become unclean. Perhaps Yahweh made this exception because of how drastically it would harm a community to lose an entire water supply if this happened.

The uncleanness associated with unclean animals is less serious than the types of uncleanness dealt with in the following chapters. Only touching the carcass of a dead animal made one unclean and all one had to do was wash and wait till evening. The types of things that made one unclean in the following chapters required a longer wait and an animal sacrifice.

Household articles that came into contact with dead carcasses became unclean and had to be washed. Why was a polluted wooden vessel able to be purified but a polluted earthenware vessel had to be destroyed? Perhaps it is because they were used for foods. Clean animals that died of natural causes became unclean and were not to be eaten. The uncleanness from dead animals was temporary. It lasted only until evening.

There were many ancient nations that observed differing lists of clean and unclean foods that could be eaten and sacrificed (Gen. 7:2-3). The reasons for the distinction between clean and unclean animals here in Leviticus are debated and still unclear. Throughout history four reasons for the distinctions between clean and unclean animals have been proposed.

The first view is that the distinction is arbitrary, and only Yahweh knows the reasons. Yahweh revealed this list in order to test their obedience. The problem with this view is that it is a negative approach, and Yahweh gave the Law to *teach* humanity about Himself and how they were to relate to Him and others.

The second view is that the distinction is a response to how the pagan nations used these animals in the worship and rituals connected to their idolatry. The unclean animals in Leviticus were the ones the pagans revered and sacrificed to their gods. Thus, avoidance of these animals would

³⁸ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Leviticus*, p. 39.

further Israel's distinction and holiness from the other nations. The strength to this view is that the covenant was designed to separate Israel from the pagan cultures (Ex. 19:5-6; Lev. 11:44-45). The problem with this view is that there is no evidence for this, and many pagan nations (e.g., the Egyptians) were known for worshiping every animal they knew of. The Canaanites sacrificed many of the same animals as Israel, such as the bull, lamb, and goat. Also, why was the bull considered clean, as it was the most dominant and prominent animal worshiped as a representation of the gods?

The third view is that the distinction is hygienic, due to the fact that the unclean animals carried diseases or were unhealthy. The problem with this view is that it does not explain *all* the distinctions, nor does Yahweh ever give any hint that health was the reason. Some of the clean animals are actually unhealthier than the unclean animals. It also fails to explain why Yahweh did not forbid poisonous plants as well as dangerous animals. Finally, if these animals were dangerous to eat, why did Jesus Christ later pronounce them good (Mark 7:19; Acts 10)?

The fourth view is that the distinction is symbolic, in that the behavior and habits of the clean animals illustrate how the Israelites were to behave. This seems to have the most weight, given how the rest of the Law works. The problem has been trying to figure out what the animals were supposed to symbolize without letting human imagination be the determining factor.

Social anthropologist Mary Douglas seems to have avoided the dangers of imaginative guesses. She argues that the food laws do have a symbolic meaning, but her interpretation is based on a comprehensive understanding of all the laws and is dependent on the distinctions between clean and unclean emphasized in Leviticus itself. As mentioned in the introduction, Gordon Wenham makes the point that the main idea of the holiness and cleanness code is that wholeness and completeness is what humans should be. Humans, and in this case animals, should function in the way that is normal to their species. Mary Douglas states that "holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong."³⁹

"The same insistence on wholeness underlies the uncleanness laws in this chapter. The animal world is divided into three spheres: those that fly in the air, those that walk on the land, and those that swim in the seas (cf. Gen. 1:20-30). Each sphere has a particular mode of motion associated with it. Birds have two wings with which to fly, and two feet for walking; fish have fins and scales with which to swim; land animals have hoofs to run with. The clean animals are those that conform to these standard pure types. Those creatures which in some way transgress the boundaries are unclean. Thus fish without fins and scales are unclean (Lev. 11:10; Deut. 14:10). Insects which fly but which have many legs are unclean, whereas locusts which have wings and only two hopping legs are clean (Lev. 11:20-23). Animals with an indeterminate form of motion, i.e., which 'swarm,' are unclean (Lev. 11:41-44)... Insofar as some animals do not conform, they are unclean."⁴⁰

Certain animals, birds, fish, and insects were unclean because they do not conform to the way that the rest of their kind act. Therefore, they are not normal or "whole." Though this reasoning explains the main divisions, it does not explain why pigs were unclean while sheep and goats were clean, when they both function in the same way. Douglas thinks that the social background of the culture has to be understood. Sheep and goats were already a *normal* part of the

³⁹ Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger*, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 169.

shepherding communities, and the Israelites depended economically on these animals, where pigs and camels did not fit these criteria. Thus, pigs and camels did not conform to the norms of behavior as defined by sheep and goats within the shepherding lifestyle of the Israelites and therefore were unclean. Once it is understood that animals symbolize the human world, the uncleanness of birds of prey becomes understandable. They are detestable because they eat carrion and meat from which the blood has not been drained, which makes one unclean (Lev. 11:13-19, 40; 17:10-14).

As Israel distinguished between clean and unclean animals, they were reminded that holiness was more than a matter of meat and drink but also a way of life characterized by purity and integrity. Normalcy and wholeness were based on the requirements of the law. Living in accordance with the law made one different from the cultures that surrounded Israel; it made one holy. Thus, the immoral, self-serving cultures were not normal and clean, so Israel was to remain separate from them in order to maintain their cleanness and holiness. Because the care of animals and the sacrificial system were a huge part of their life, not only would these distinctions between clean and unclean animals keep them from intermixing with the pagan nations who did not have the same distinctions, but they would be a constant reminder to the people that they were to remain distinct and why. These regulations taught Israel to act with discrimination according to Yahweh's standard of righteousness because they had been distinctly separated from the rest of humanity. They were separate not because Yahweh was overly strict but because they do not function in a normal way according to the other animals of their classification. Yahweh used the distinction between clean and unclean animals to teach Israel to remain distinct from the Gentiles.

“If the proposed interpretation of the forbidden animals is correct, the dietary laws would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity and completeness of God. By rules of avoidance holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and every meal. Observance of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship which culminated in the sacrifice in the Temple.”⁴¹

This is the way that the Second Testament saw it, with the distinction between the clean Jewish people and the unclean Gentiles (Mark 7:19; Acts 10). Yahweh used the distinction between clean and unclean animals to teach Israel to remain distinct from the Gentiles. However, there was no formal law that forbade Israelites from associating with Gentiles. But with the coming of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, Yahweh made all who became a part of His covenant community clean. Therefore, the distinction was not based on the cultural practices of a certain nation but on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who made one clean. Therefore, all nations and people could now become clean and holy through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit then changes the person from the inside out so they begin to become whole and to act in a normal way according to the commands of Yahweh. The distinction between clean and unclean animals was therefore lifted because the Gentiles could become clean under a whole new criteria (Acts 10).

⁴¹ Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger*, p. 72.

E. Uncleaness Due to Childbirth (12:1-8)

This section deals with the unclean state of a woman after she has given birth. Whereas the previous chapter (Lev. 11) dealt with the causes of pollution that are external to humanity, this chapter deals with the causes of pollution that are internal to humanity. The point of these verses is to make the point that pollution could come from within the person as well as from their outside environment. Contamination resulted in separation from the fellowship of the sanctuary and/or from fellow Israelites.

12:1-2 Yahweh stated that if a woman gave birth to a male child, she was unclean for seven days after the birth. Not only was she unclean and not permitted to visit the tabernacle, but everything she touched became unclean. It was not the birth itself that made the woman unclean, for there is nothing mentioned about the child being unclean. Rather, it was the discharge (lochia) that follows child birth that made the woman unclean.⁴² For the first few days, this discharge is bright red, then it turns brown, and then it becomes paler. Because the first phase resembles the menstrual period, it is treated as contagiously unclean for the first week, as when she menstruates. The Bible does not state why any discharge should make one unclean. The most likely reason is that loss of blood or discharges make a person lack wholeness and, therefore, become unclean.⁴³ Loss of blood can also lead to death, the opposite of normal life.

“Thus blood is at once the most effective ritual cleanser (‘the blood makes atonement,’ 17:11) and the most polluting substance when it is in the wrong place. This is profound. Our greatest woes result from the corruption of our highest good, e.g., speech, sex, technology, atomic power.”⁴⁴

12:3 On the eighth day after birth, the male child was then to be circumcised in obedience to the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:9-14). Circumcision was not a new rite in the ancient Near East. The priests in Egypt practiced it, but in Mesopotamia and Canaan, it was not customary. Later, the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites practiced it, but the Philistines did not. Normally, it was practiced on young adults (Gen. 34), whereas circumcising infants was something new here. In the ancient Near East, it seems to have been a rite of passage for a male who had come of age, for preparation for marriage, or as an offering to a deity.⁴⁵ It also had hygienic value since penile cancer has a higher rate of occurrence in uncircumcised males.⁴⁶

Though these same ideas are found in Genesis 17, far more meaning is attached to it. First, the sign is a reminder of Yahweh’s promise of fertility to Abraham. It is from the male reproductive organ that this seed of life will come, which will multiply into a great nation. This is significant in a book of genealogies, where the seed of the land and the seed of humanity have already been directly linked as life and blessing. The marking of this organ, responsible for children, will be a reminder of Yahweh’s promises. At the very heart of the promises of Yahweh to Abraham is the promise of the seed that will be a great nation and ultimately bless the whole world. Thus, the

⁴² See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 188.

⁴³ See Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger*, p. 51.

⁴⁴ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 188.

⁴⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 23. Also Derek Kidner. *Genesis*, p. 174.

⁴⁶ See Jay D. Fawver and R. Larry Overstreet, “Moses and Preventive Medicine,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:587 (July-September 1990):276.

organ responsible for the procreation of the seed must be consecrated to Yahweh (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 4:4).

Second, the male and female genitalia are the only organs in the human body that produce both life (seed/egg) and death (urine). The idea is that if one is not marked by Yahweh, then the flesh can produce only death. But if one is marked by Yahweh, then one can produce life and blessings. Yahweh commands Abraham and his descendants to cut off this part of their flesh, or they would be cut off from the covenant blessings. They would be without life. Spiritually, it would have been a frequent reminder to every circumcised male of Yahweh's promises involving seed and a symbol that they had repudiated "the flesh" in favor of trust in Yahweh and His spiritual promises. It is possible, since Yahweh does not require child sacrifice, that this is a substitutionary sacrifice of the body to Yahweh.

This idea will be developed further when Yahweh makes the point that humanity is incapable of producing life and blessing and so must be circumcised of the heart (Deut. 10:10-16; 30:6; Ps. 51:10-12; Jer. 9:25; 31:31-34; Ezek. 11:17-19). Metaphorically, the heart is also an organ that can produce life or death. Humanity's heart is corrupt and evil (Ecc. 9:3; Jer. 17:9). This corruption must be cut away from the heart so that humanity will both desire and be capable of obedience to Yahweh. This is made possible through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit after Christ offered up His flesh to death on our behalf, so that we could produce life (Rom. 2:29).

The requirement of circumcision being on the eighth day shows that Yahweh is truly the creator and sustainer of the human body (Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3). Before birth, a baby's nutrients and antibodies comes from the mother's blood, including her blood-clotting ability, made possible by the protein prothrombin. Prothrombin is dependent on vitamin K for its production. At birth, the baby is unable to produce vitamin K. After birth, prothrombin decreases so that by the third day it is only at 30 percent of normal; hemorrhaging would result if this skin were cut. Gradually, the body begins to produce vitamin K, and by the eighth day, production is at 110 percent; it then levels off to 100 percent for the remainder of one's life. Therefore, the eighth day was the safest of all days for circumcision to be performed. Today, vitamin K is routinely administered to newborns shortly after their delivery, which eliminates the clotting problem. However, before the days of vitamin K injections, a 1953 pediatrics textbook recommended that the best day to circumcise a newborn was the eighth day of life.⁴⁷

12:4 After a week, the woman remained unclean within herself, though she would no longer make others unclean when she touched them she could not touch anything holy or enter the tabernacle courtyard. And if she were a priest's wife, she was not allowed to eat the priestly portions of the sacrifices.

12:5 It is not clear why the birth of a female child made the woman unclean for fourteen days, twice as long as for a male child. There was a belief in the ancient world that postnatal discharge lasted longer for a girl than for a boy.⁴⁸ While many argue that this is not true, D. I. Macht has argued that there is scientific evidence for such a belief, though his findings do not explain the need for a doubling of the time-period.⁴⁹ But perhaps the doubling was to maintain a multiple of seven, which communicated completion.

⁴⁷ See L. Holt, Jr. and R. McIntosh, *Holt Pediatrics*, pp. 125-26.

⁴⁸ See A. Dillmann. *Exodus Und Leviticus*, p. 506.

⁴⁹ See D. I. Macht. "A Scientific Appreciation of Leviticus 12:1-5," *JBL* 52 (1933), pp. 253-260.

12:6-8 The purification offering was presented first to cleanse the sanctuary that she had just entered unclean in order to become clean. Then the burnt offering was brought to secure her forgiveness of sins, to express her gratitude for her child, and to renew her dedication to Yahweh. A poor person could bring a bird instead of a lamb.

F. Uncleaness Due to Skin Diseases (13:1–14:57)

In this section, Yahweh lists the signs of skin diseases and molds that were considered harmful and contagious and would render one unclean. Skin disease became a symbol of sin and what it would do to the life and health of the individual and possibly to the community. Skin diseases that are more than superficial and actively spread are clearly abnormal and, by disfiguring the appearance, destroys a person's wholeness. For this reason, these skin diseases are declared to make a person unclean.

The regulations given in these verses were meant to teach the priests the distinction between clean and unclean skin disorders. Prescriptions and cures were never described for the skin disease, merely that the priest was to inspect the person every seven days to see if there was a change in the condition. The skin diseases became an analogy of sin—how it is much more than just an external condition and how quickly it can spread throughout the community if left unchecked.

Most translations used to translate the Hebrew *tsara 'at* as “leprosy,” but this not an accurate translation. The reason for this confusion came first from the fact that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, choose the Greek word *lepra*. And second, other passages described the word *tsara 'at* as being like snow (Ex. 4:6; Num. 12:10; 2 Kgs. 5:27). Translators added “white as” to the word “snow.” The word “white” is not in the Hebrew, and there is no justification for adding the word “white” to the simile of “snow.” The point of comparison may be the flakiness of snow rather than the whiteness of snow.

In fact, leprosy is not one of diseases described, and for several reasons. First, there is no evidence from archeological discoveries from Egypt to suggest that people dealt with leprosy before the fifth century AD. Second, the symptoms of leprosy do not match the descriptions in Leviticus. Likewise, none of the most obvious signs of leprosy are described in Leviticus, including painlessness, the progressive breaking of the skin, and facial nodules. Third, the Greek word *lepra* did not even designate true leprosy. The Greek word used for leprosy was *elephantiasis*.⁵⁰

Many translations since have instead begun to translate *tsara 'at* as just “skin disease.” It is now understood by modern scholars and doctors that many different skin diseases are being described in Lev. 13. It is difficult to find one English word to cover these diverse conditions, many of which we do not even know what they are. Some scholars are more confident than others in identifying the skin diseases described here. Browne holds that it is impossible to truly identify the skin disease described.⁵¹ Hulse believes that the skin disease referred to in Lev. 13:2 is psoriasis, the skin disease in Lev. 13:29 is favus, and the skin diseases in Lev. 13:38-39 are vitiligo and leukoderma.⁵²

13:1-8 Yahweh declared that if someone had swelling, a scab, or a bright spot on their skin, then he or she was to go to the priest for inspection. If the priest saw that the hair had turned white and that the problem was deeper than the surface of the skin, then the person was declared

⁵⁰ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 195.

⁵¹ See S. G. Browne. *Leprosy in the Bible*, p. 5.

⁵² See E. V. Hulse. “The Nature of Biblical ‘Leprosy’ and the Use of Alternative Medical Terms in Modern Translations of the Bible.” *PEQ* 107 (1975). pp. 93-96.

unclean. The whiteness of the hair might have been due to the scales of the skin clinging to the hair.⁵³

If the priest did not see either of these signs, then the person was to be quarantined for a week. After the week, if there were no change upon a second inspection, then the person was to be quarantined for another week. Upon a third inspection, if there were no change and the spot had begun to fade, the priest was to declare the person clean. They were then to wash and return to their home. If however, it had spread, then it was a disease and the person was pronounced unclean.

13:9-17 If the flesh was raw, there was swelling, and the person had been symptomatic for a while, then they were unclean. The exact meaning of “raw” is hard to determine. It may refer to the inflammation of the skin making it red. Or it could mean that the skin had broken and there was bleeding.⁵⁴ If there was red and raw skin all over, he was unclean. But if the skin all over had turned white, then he was clean. The idea here is that the skin disease had cleared up and the old, dead skin had turned white from peeling off because new skin was growing in its place.

13:18-28 If a person had a boil or burn and the skin in the affected area had turned white and the bright skin looked deeper than the surface, then they are unclean. If the hair was black and the spot was superficial, then they were clean.

13:29-37 For the head and beard, if the hair was yellowish and the infection was deeper than the surface, then the person was unclean. The yellowing of the hair could be favus.⁵⁵ If after a week of quarantine the hair was black and the area had not spread, then they were clean. They were to shave their hair and then be quarantined for another week. If it still had not spread, then they were declared clean and were to wash their clothes.

13:38-45 If they had white spots that did not go deeper than the skin, then they were declared clean. If they were bald, then they were clean.

13:45-46 The declaration of a skin disease required the person to be declared unclean and to be quarantined outside the camp. Even though this seems unloving on the surface, the reason was for the protection of the rest of the community from infection. The person with the skin disease was required to live alone, outside the community, just as Adam and Eve were cast outside the Garden of Eden to live alone after their rebellion and fall (Gen. 3:23-24). Likewise, the person was to tear his or her clothes and cry out “unclean” when approaching those who were clean. Tearing the clothes, messing the hair, and covering the upper lip were all signs of mourning (Lev. 10:6; 21:10; Gen. 37:34; Num. 14:6; 2 Sam. 1:11; 2 Kgs. 11:14; 19:1; 22:11, 19; Ezra 9:5; Ezek. 24:17, 22; Mic. 3:7). A solitary existence was seen as a calamity in itself in ancient times. The sinner and the impure were banished (Lev. 10:4-5; Num. 5:1-4; 12:14-15; 31:19-34), and outside the community was the place where wrongdoers were executed (Num. 15:35-36). To live outside the camp was to be cut off from the blessings of the covenant (Gen. 3).

“Holiness in Leviticus is symbolized by wholeness. Animals must be perfect to be used in sacrifice. Priests must be without physical deformity. Mixtures are an abomination. Men

⁵³ See E. V. Hulse. “The Nature of Biblical ‘Leprosy’ and the Use of Alternative Medical Terms in Modern Translations of the Bible.” PEQ 107 (1975). p. 95.

⁵⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 198.

⁵⁵ See E. V. Hulse. “The Nature of Biblical ‘Leprosy’ and the Use of Alternative Medical Terms in Modern Translations of the Bible.” PEQ 107 (1975). p. 99.

must behave in a way that expresses wholeness and integrity in their actions. When a man shows visible signs of lack of wholeness in a persistent patchy skin condition, he has to be excluded from the covenant community. Temporary deviations from the norm do not attract such treatment, but if the symptoms last for more than two weeks, he must go to live outside the true Israel... Anyone might fall victim to these complaints and face the prospect of being cut off from his family and friends for the rest of his days. Yet it was considered so important to preserve the purity of the tabernacle and the holiness of the nation that individuals and families might be forced to suffer a good deal. Individual discomfort was not allowed to jeopardize the spiritual welfare of the nation, for God's abiding presence with his people depended on uncleanness being excluded from their midst (cf. Isa. 6:3-5)."⁵⁶

13:47-59 Yahweh also gave regulations for inspecting clothes that had become contaminated with mold, mildew, or other contaminants. The Mosaic Law did not view these abnormalities as dangerous to the health. But they did represent deviation from what was considered clean. The author used the Hebrew word *tsara'at* for a "disease" of the clothing because it creates an abnormal surface, disfiguring the surface of the garment just like a skin disease. What is most likely being referred to here is mold. The warp (vertical) and woof (horizontal) threads may be two different sets of thread not yet woven together, or they may refer to two different kinds of thread already woven, in which case one might have the disease in it while the other does not.⁵⁷

If the fabric had a disease, then it was to be inspected by the priest and quarantined for seven days. Upon a second inspection, if it had spread, then it was declared unclean and was burned. But if it had not spread, then the garment was washed and then quarantined for another seven days. If it had not gone away, even if it had not spread, then it was unclean and was to be burned. If it had faded, then the diseased area was to be torn out of the fabric. And if it was gone, then the fabric was to be declared clean.

14:1-7 The procedures described in Lev. 14 were not physical cures but ritual, spiritual cleansing. The priests were not doctors who were meant to heal the person of the skin disease. They were merely meant to diagnose whether the person was unclean or clean. Yahweh explained how the priests and the Israelites could recognize healed skin so that the once-infected person could be declared clean and resume worship in the community. Israel differed from the surrounding nations, who performed exorcisms and magical rites to cure diseases. In Israel, a person had to seek help directly from Yahweh in prayer.

On the day of the previously infected person's purification, the priest was to go outside the camp to inspect the infection. If the person was declared clean, then newly clean person was to kill a bird and bleed it out into a clay vessel that was over fresh water. Then they were to take a live bird, a piece of cedar, crimson fabric, and twigs of hyssop and dip them in the blood all together. Then the person was to be sprinkled seven times with the blood that covered the live bird, and the live bird was to be released. This action establishes a visible connection between the worshipers and the birds. The dead bird represented the death that the person had escaped due to Yahweh's mercy, and the live bird represented the new life that he or she had been given. The cedar represented long life, and the scarlet thread represented blood and the vitality of life. Hyssop also represented life and purification from corruption.

⁵⁶ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 203.

⁵⁷ See Jacob Milgrom. *Leviticus*, pp. 1:809-10.

Davies connects the released bird with the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement ritual.⁵⁸ The bird carried away the polluting skin disease, just like the scapegoat carried away the sins of Israel.

14:8-9 The one being cleansed was to wash his or her clothes, shave all body hair, and bathe. Then they were allowed to enter the camp but remain outside their tent for seven days. Then they were to do it all again so that they may be clean. This may seem like overkill to the modern world, but, in fact, we respond to diseases very similarly. In a culture that lived outside, bathed very rarely, and had no sophisticated testing for diseases, this process would be crucial for their health and the health of the community. When people today contract highly contagious diseases, they are quarantined. And when they come out, they are scrubbed down and tested. When a family has all had the flu, all the sheets and clothes are washed, surfaces are disinfected, and a shower is crucial. The difference is that this is all so much more accessible and easier for us that we do not even think about it; it has become a part of our daily routine.

14:10-32 On the eighth day, the one being cleansed was to offer a burnt offering and was then restored to fellowship with Yahweh in the sanctuary. The blood of the sacrifice placed on the ear, hand, and foot consecrated the person to Yahweh, and the oil was the anointing of the Spirit's power and gifts. Sacrifice was required in case the skin disease was caused by sin (Num. 12:9-10; 2 Kgs. 5:27; 2 Chr. 26:16-21).

“As the Flood was once necessary to cleanse God's good creation from the evil that had contaminated it, so the ritual washings were a necessary part of checking the spread of sin and its results in the covenant community.”⁵⁹

14:33-53 The fact that certain abnormal conditions afflicted houses as well as persons reminded the Israelites that their dwelling places as well as their bodies needed to be holy. Yahweh prescribed the same rite of purification for a house as for a person. He did not require sacrifices, however, because buildings need only to be cleaned.

⁵⁸ See D. J. Davies. “An Interpretation of Sacrifice in Leviticus,” in ZAW 89 (1977).

⁵⁹ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 338.

G. Uncleanness Due to Bodily Discharges (15:1-33)

Yahweh described four cases of secretions from the male and female reproductive organs that resulted in ritual uncleanness. Both the male and the female had an unnatural and a natural cause for the discharge. All four of these cases required ritual purification. The point of declaring the loss of blood unclean was that the loss of blood equaled the loss of life (Lev. 17:11, 14). Bleeding can eventually lead to death. So, the discharging male or female was regarded as unclean in that they evidently did not enjoy a whole life, which, unchecked, would end in their death. Similarly, male semen was viewed as a “life liquid.” Thus, its loss, whether long-term or brief, was viewed as polluting.

15:1-15 Anytime a male had any discharge from his “flesh,” for any reason, he was unclean. The Hebrew word *basar* can mean “flesh” or “meat” (Lev. 4:11), the “body” as a whole (Lev. 14:9), or as a weak and mortal “man” as opposed to Yahweh (Gen. 6:3; Isa. 31:3). It is most likely being used as a euphemism for the male genitalia, for the same word is used of the female genitalia in Lev. 15:19.

If the male had a prolonged, unnatural discharge from his reproductive organ, he was declared unclean. Not only was he declared unclean, but all the things he came into contact with were unclean as well. And anyone who had touched anything he had touched was also unclean. They needed only to wash themselves and were then unclean only until evening. Many commentators have identified this discharge as gonorrhea. Unlike the skin diseases, his uncleanness did not require him to live outside the camp, merely to continually wash himself. Though these rules may have been an inconvenience, they did allow the man to live at home and live a normal life within the camp. When a man became clean again, he was to wash himself and present a purification sacrifice in the tabernacle.

15:16-18 If he had seminal emission, he was to bathe his whole body and was unclean only until evening. Notice that the act of sex rendered a person unclean, and they could not enter the presence of Yahweh in the tabernacle. Yahweh was not declaring sex wrong nor unclean, for He was the one who gave the command to be fruitful and multiply, both before and after the fall (Gen.). Rather, Yahweh was keeping sex separate from His sanctuary to prevent it from being used as an act of worship, as was common among some of the other nations. This was crucial, for Israel was surrounded by fertility cults where sex was a key component of the worship of the gods (Num. 25). The male was unclean only until evening, and no sacrifice was required.

“One valuable feature of this legislation that had an important bearing upon Israel’s cultic and social life was the rule which made partners in coition unclean for the whole day. This contingency separated sexual activity from cultic worship in a unique manner, and this precluded the orgiastic fertility rites that were so much a part of religion among peoples such as the Canaanites. Furthermore, the continuous state of ceremonial uncleanness experienced by the prostitute in Israel would remove any possibility of her participation in Hebrew worship, and take away anything approaching respectability from her way of life, if, indeed, she was at all sensitive to the requirements of the sanctuary.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ R. K. Harrison. *Leviticus*, pp. 165-66.

“The banning of the sexual and the sensual from the presence of God (Ex. 19:15, [sic] 20:26; Lev. 15:16-18) may have been one of the most noteworthy characteristics of Israel’s religion, uniquely distinguishing it from the other religions of the ancient Near East.”⁶¹

15:19-24 When a woman had blood flow due to menstruation, then she was unclean for seven days and must bathe during that time. Anything she touched was also considered unclean. Sexual intercourse during a woman’s menstrual period was forbidden (Lev. 18:19; Ezek. 18:6; 22:10), and the woman and the man who had sex with her were to be “cut off,” which means to suffer divine punishment (Lev. 20:18). No sacrifice was required for the menstrual period; as long as the boundaries of uncleanness were not transgressed, then no guilt was incurred.

15:25-30 If she had unnatural blood flow not during the time of her menstruation, then she and anything she touched were unclean for that time. Anyone who touched anything she had touched was unclean. They had only to wash themselves and were unclean only until evening. When the discharge no longer flowed, and at the end of the seven-day purification, the woman offered the minimum sacrifice—two turtledoves and two pigeons as sacrifices of atonement.

15:31-33 Sin is any wrong done to Yahweh, but ritual uncleanness was a condition that, while a result of the effects of sin on the creation, was not itself sinful. These conditions did not result in sinfulness of the Israelite but in his or her disqualification from public worship in the nation.

“Verse 31 explains the reason for these regulations. God gave them so the Israelites would not fall into serious sin because of ignorance of how they should behave when unclean. The rules about bodily discharges helped the Israelites appreciate the seriousness of intermarriage with the Canaanites and the prohibitions against foreign customs and religion, which conflicted with Israel’s holy calling. God discouraged certain acts by designating them as resulting in uncleanness, which undoubtedly proved helpful in the area of private morality where legal sanctions are not as effective as in public life.”⁶²

“The laws concerning the menstrual period on first inspection seem very harsh to the modern mind. At face value they seem to consign every adult woman in Israel to a state of untouchability for one week a month. But as has been pointed out, it is probably a fairly recent phenomenon for women to suffer a menstrual period once a month between adolescence and the menopause. This is not because female physiology has changed, but because of the different social habits of modern Western society. In ancient Israel three factors would combine to make menstruation very much rarer, at least among married women. These were early marriage, probably soon after puberty, and late weaning (perhaps at the age of two or three years), and the desire for large families (Ps. 127:4-5). The only women likely to be much affected by the law of Lev. 15: 19-24 would be unmarried teenage girls. The relative frequency of their periods and the contagiousness of the uncleanness associated with menstruation should have made any God-fearing young man wary of physical contact with a girl he did not know well, for if he went to worship in an unclean condition, he was liable to God’s judgment. In this way these regulations may have promoted restraint in relations between the sexes and have acted as a brake on the passions of the young.”⁶³

⁶¹ Samuel J. Schultz. *Leviticus: God Among His People*, p. 78.

⁶² Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Leviticus*, p. 53.

⁶³ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, pp. 223-224.

H. Day of Atonement (16:1-34)

Leviticus 11–15 has been concerned with explaining the difference between clean and unclean. Lev. 16:1 informs us that the instructions for the Day of Atonement immediately followed the death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10). Thus Lev. 16 sets out the proper rituals that the high priest must carry out to cleanse the tabernacle and preserve himself from a fate similar to Nadab and Abihu. The main purpose of the Day of Atonement ritual was to cleanse the tabernacle from the pollutions that had built up over the past year due to the unclean worshippers. This made it possible for Yahweh's continued presence among His people.

The Bible attaches greater significance to action than modern westerners do. For us, sinful actions are just memories. But for Yahweh, sinful actions defile and corrupt a place (Lev. 18:24-30; Deut. 21:1-9). The sacrifices described in Lev. 1-6 were not sufficient to cleanse all the defilement that the sins of the people created. Therefore, after a year, Israel's sins had built up to such a point that it polluted even the tabernacle and the holy of holies, where Yahweh dwelt. Thus, at the beginning of each year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to offer a purification offering. For this, he placed the blood of a goat on the atonement lid of the Ark of the Covenant in order to purify the holy of holies.

This chapter is the theological pivot on which the whole book of Leviticus turns. It is the event that transitions the book from its discussion on how one should come into the presence of a holy God to how one should live a holy life before this holy God. The significance of this day is what enabled the nation to come into the presence of Yahweh and to go out into the world and live in a pleasing way before Him.

16:1-10 Yahweh was so holy compared to the people that even the high priest, who was the symbol of holiness to the people, was not allowed to enter the presence of Yahweh in the holy of holies except once a year and with a blood offering. He was then to wash himself as a symbol of his cleanness and then dress down in less fancy and regal attire (Ex. 28). On the Day of Atonement, he was to look more like a servant. Aaron was required to offer two sacrifices for himself before he could represent the people. He was to offer a bull as a purification offering and a ram as a burnt offering. Then for the people, he was to offer two goats as a purification offering and a ram as a burnt offering. Before he went into the holy of holies with the blood of these offerings, he was to cast lots over the two goats. The one upon which the lot fell became the offering to Yahweh, and the other goat was led out into the wilderness to Azazel.

The meaning of the Hebrew term *aza'zel*, used only in this chapter, is much debated. The most popular is that Azazel was a demon that lived in the wilderness. First, Azazel is in direct contrast to Yahweh. It is argued that Yahweh would not be contrasted with something impersonal. Second, in later Jewish writings Azazel is a demon (Enoch 8:1; 9:6). Third, the First Testament looks on the wilderness as the haunt of the demons and similar creatures (Lev. 17:7; Isa. 13:21; 34:14; Matt. 12:43).⁶⁴ Those who take this view insist that the goat was not a sacrifice or gift to the demon Azazel. Israel was simply sending their sins back to where they came from.

There are others who object to this view because it is dangerously close to being seen as a sacrifice to a demon. The offering of sacrifices to a wilderness goat demon is spoken of as a heinous crime in the next chapter (Lev. 17:7). Thus, it is hard to see Yahweh having any hint of

⁶⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 234.

this connected to the Day of Atonement. Some scholars have connected Azazel to a rare Hebrew word meaning “complete destruction.”⁶⁵ Or, it could mean “rocky precipice.”⁶⁶

16:11-19 Aaron was then to enter the holy place with the incense and place it on the altar of incense in order to create a thick smoke. The purpose of the incense and smoke was to create a screen to prevent the high priest from viewing the glory of Yahweh over the Ark of the Covenant.⁶⁷ He was then to dip his finger in the blood of the bull of his own purification offering and sprinkle the blood seven times on the eastern side of the atonement lid of the Ark of the Covenant. He was then to dip his finger in the blood of the goat of the people’s purification offering and sprinkle the blood seven times on the eastern side of the atonement lid of the Ark of the Covenant. This ritual cleansed the tabernacle from the pollutions that had built up over the past year due to the unclean worshipers. This made it possible for Yahweh’s continued presence among His people. He was then to take some of the blood of the bull and goat and sprinkle it on the bronze altar.

16:20-22 He was then to press his hands into the second goat and confess the sins of the people, then lead the goat out into the wilderness bearing all the sins of Israel. “A region that is cut off” is literally “a land of cutting off.” This could mean that the goat was led to a place in order to be “cut off” from the camp. Or, it could refer to the fact that the goat was taken to a place where its life was “cut off.”⁶⁸ The other goat was led out into the wilderness so far that it could not find its way back. This was a symbol of the people’s sins being removed from them and from the presence of Yahweh to be held against them no more as judgment for their sins. The ritual done in the holy of holies was unseen by the public. The ritual of the scapegoat, on the other hand, was a powerful visual aid to the public of the reality of sin’s elimination.

“The two goats used in the ritual represented two aspects of the atonement that God provided. Both animals taught the Israelites that a sinless agent was removing their sins by vicarious atonement. The goat slain represented the judgment on sin that resulted in death necessary for atonement. The goat sent off into the wilderness with the sinner’s guilt imputed to it symbolized the removal of guilt (cf. 14:4-7).”⁶⁹

16:23-28 The high priest was then to enter the tabernacle and take off his linen garments, bathe, and put them back on. He was then to offer up the burnt offering for himself and for the people along with the fat of the purification offerings. Then the one who led the goat out into the wilderness must bathe and wash his clothes before reentering the camp. Then the bull and goat from the burnt offerings were to be taken outside the camp, and their hide, flesh, and dung must be burned up. The one who burned them must wash and bathe as well. Notice the emphasis on bathing and removing defilement.

16:29-34 For the entire day of the festival, the nation was to humble themselves and to fast. Watching the priest do all the offering may lead one to think that the purification of sin was an easy task. The command to “afflict” yourself (fasting) would have shown people that the

⁶⁵ See D. Hoffmann. *Das Buch Leviticus I-II*, p. 444. And J. H. Hertz. *Leviticus*, p. 154

⁶⁶ See Rashi. *Pentateuch with Rashi’s Commentary*, p. 73b.

⁶⁷ See J. H. Hertz. *Leviticus*, p. 156.

⁶⁸ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 233.

⁶⁹ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Leviticus*, p. 58.

elimination of sin was not an easy task. No matter how well done, the ritual performed could only be effective if all of Israel demonstrated true repentance.

The fact that this sacrifice had to be repeated year after year demonstrates the insufficiency of the sacrifice to truly remove the sins of the people (Heb. 9). Thus, not only did the Day of Atonement teach the people about the meaning of atonement and holiness, but it also pointed to the need for a greater and superior sacrifice (Jesus Christ) that could atone for the sins once and for all.

II. Holiness in the Life of the People (17:1–27:34)

Emphasis of this division shifts from ceremonial purity to personal moral purity. After giving specific instructions in the previous division (Lev. 1-17) of how a sinner comes into the presence of a holy God, the focus now shifts to how one lives righteously and remains pure in a sinful world (Lev. 18-27). Unlike the previous division, which contained a lot of ceremonial instructions, the focus will now be on law codes.

A. Warnings against Improper Actions (17:1-16)

The laws in Lev. 17 deal with the various problems connected with sacrifice and eating meat. These matters have already been discussed in Lev. 1-7, 11. Lev. 17 draws together themes that run through the previous sixteen chapters. It explains the significance of blood in the sacrifices. Lev. 17 serves as a hinge chapter, linking the previous division with this division, moving from the regulations for public worship to those for the personal and private affairs of individuals.

Unlike the regulations in Lev. 1-6, this one says very little about the role of the priests. It focuses more on the mistakes that the worshiper might make, such as killing an animal outside the tabernacle or forgetting to drain out the blood before eating the meat. Yahweh clearly warns the people to not go outside the priestly system that He has established for their atonement and not to conduct themselves in the way that the pagans did. The Israelites were not allowed to eat any meat that was not sacrificed and offered to Yahweh in the tabernacle. Some have questioned how the priest could handle all of this, but people of the ancient Near East very rarely ate meat, unlike today. Their diet was mostly that of bread and fruits.

17:1-9 Here, Yahweh strictly forbade sacrifices made outside of the tabernacle and without the presence of the priests. The penalty for this violation was that they would be “cut off” from Yahweh, which implies a premature death at the hands of Yahweh. The reason for such a harsh judgment was first that the animal was an offering to Yahweh for their sins and so must be done in His presence. Second was that the pagans made sacrifices to the goat demons in the wilderness, and Israel was not to serve the gods of the pagans nor worship like the pagans.

“The goat demon was a god that the Egyptians and other ancient Near Easterners worshiped. It was supposedly responsible for the fertility of the people, their herds, and their crops. They believed it inhabited the deserts. A goat represented this demon (cf. 1 Cor. 10:20), and part of its abhorrent rituals involved goats copulating with women votaries. The Israelites were at this time committing idolatry with this Egyptian god (v. 7). They continued to worship Egyptian deities for many generations (cf. Josh. 24:14) in spite of commandments like this one that should have ended this practice. Even today the goat is a demonic symbol in Satan worship.”⁷⁰

“Just as the narrative about the incident of the golden calf revealed the imminent danger of Israel’s falling into idolatry, so the present narrative demonstrates the ongoing threat. These two narratives play an important role in the composition of this part of the Pentateuch... The two narratives showing the threat of idolatry bracket the detailed legislation dealing with the office of the priest—legislation primarily directed toward preventing further idolatry. The

⁷⁰ Thomas L. Constable. *Note on Leviticus*, p. 62.

narratives provide the priestly legislation with two vivid examples of Israel's falling away after 'other gods.'"⁷¹

This law only worked when eating meat was rare and everyone lived close to the tabernacle. In Deut. 12:20-24, Yahweh allowed the Israelites to slaughter their animals outside of the tabernacle without going through the rituals required in Leviticus.

17:10-14 Yahweh once again forbade the drinking of the blood of the animal. The reasons for this prohibition were discussed in Lev. 7:22-38.

“Blood is the life-sustaining fluid of the body (vv. 11, 14). Life poured out in bloodshed made atonement for sin. Consequently the eating or drinking of blood was inappropriate since blood had expiatory value and represented life.”⁷²

“By refraining from eating flesh with blood in it, man is honoring life. To eat blood is to despise life. This idea emerges most clearly in Gen. 9:4ff., where the sanctity of human life is associated with not eating blood. Thus one purpose of this law is the inculcation of respect for all life.”⁷³

17:15-16 Yahweh not only forbade touching the carcass of a dead animal but also eating of it. This would be extremely unhealthy due to all the diseases that would be in a rotting carcass. Likewise, one could not be sure if the blood from the animal had been completely drained, which would render one unclean.

⁷¹ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 343.

⁷² Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Leviticus*, p. 63.

⁷³ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 245.

B. The Conduct of Yahweh's People (18:1–20:27)

The purpose of the laws in this section was to charge the Israelites with the duty of making sure that there would be no “wickedness” in the land (Lev. 18:17; 19:29; 20:14). The laws were to warn the Israelites against mixing with and thus becoming like the Canaanites, Egyptians, and Babylonians. By obeying Yahweh, they could remain pure and experience life to the fullest.

There is a strong polemical thrust in these laws. Seven times in Lev. 18 it is repeated that the Israelites are not to behave like the nations who inhabited Canaan before them (Lev. 18:3 [2x], 24, 26, 27, 29, 30). Six times the phrase “I am Yahweh (your God)” is repeated (Lev. 18:2, 4, 5, 6, 21, 30). Israel's sexual morality was a way to mark them as distinct from the pagan nations that surrounded them. The sexual purity of the Israelites was just as important as the way that they sacrificed their animals in worship.

18:1-5 Leviticus 18 begins with Yahweh giving three reasons for their obedience to His commands. First, they were to obey because He was Yahweh their God. This phrase communicates three ideas. The first idea is that Yahweh is their God who had redeemed them from their slavery in Egypt. The second idea is that Israel was to be holy as Yahweh was holy. The third idea is that Israel was to obey Yahweh not because they had to but because they loved Yahweh and wanted to.

The second reason they were to obey Yahweh was so that they did not become like the surrounding cultures. For the surrounding cultures, these sexual boundaries did not exist; in fact, these relationships were encouraged and even celebrated since this was what their gods did as well.

The third reason they were to obey Yahweh was so that they could live and have life to the fullest. The idea of “live” in Lev. 18:5 means to have physical life, as well as Yahweh's covenant blessings of eternal life as defined in Ezek. 20:11.

“Fundamentally God is holy because He is unique and incomparable. Those whom He calls to servanthood must therefore understand their holiness not primarily as some kind of ‘spirituality’ but as their uniqueness and separateness as the elect and called of God. But holiness must also find expression in life by adhering to ethical principles and practices that demonstrate godlikeness. This is the underlying meaning of being the ‘image of God.’”⁷⁴

It is understood that marriage with non-Israelites was not allowed. Elsewhere in Scriptures, this was strictly forbidden, and marriages within a tribe were given preference (Num. 36; Judg. 21).

18:6-18 These regulations begin with the command that no one was to approach a close relative in order to have sexual relations with them. The point is that they were already connected in one type of relationship and so were not to also connect sexually. These two types of relationships were not to be mixed.

In these verses, Yahweh limits with whom you may have sexual relations and thus whom you are allowed to marry. These verses establish the inner boundary that protects the sacredness of marriage. To understand these, one must understand Yahweh's view, and the culture's view, of marriage. First, Yahweh established marriage as a social institution that would become the cornerstone of all other social structures. Thus, the way one treats the integrity and purity of

⁷⁴ Eugene E. Merrill. “A Theology of the Pentateuch,” p. 58.

marriage and the family will determine the integrity and purity of the greater culture. Second, to Yahweh and Israel, sexual intercourse *was* marriage. To have sexual intercourse with someone was to take him or her as your spouse (Gen. 24:67; Ex. 22:16-17; Mal. 2:13-16; Matt. 19:4-6; 1 Cor. 6:16). Thus, Yahweh does not have any concept of “premarital sex” because sex makes you married (Gen. 24:67). Third, there was no concept of romantic love, compatibility, or choosing your spouse. Marriage was a commitment between two people to become one flesh and thus serve each other. The goal of marriage was not to become happy but to become more holy and to strengthen the community. Finally, culturally speaking, polygamy and concubines were not uncommon, which complicates the makeup of the family.⁷⁵

The list of sexual prohibitions begins with the closest relations and descends to the least related. The goal of the restrictions is not to be comprehensive but to show the closeness between individuals and that being sexually involved with them creates confusion, drama, and social collapse within the family. Yahweh forbids sexual relations between mother and son, stepmother and son, brother and sister and half-sister, father and granddaughter, nephew and aunt, father and daughter-in-law, brother and sister-in-law, father and stepdaughter and step-granddaughter, husband and mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Sexual relations with cousins are not mentioned.

There is one omission, which is marriage with one’s daughter. This is probably because it was already accepted that such a union was illicit (Gen. 19:30-38). It is expressly forbidden in the laws of Hammurabi and the Hittite laws. Yahweh was extending the laws that already existed.

In addition to this, a man was not allowed to marry the wife of a close relative after his death. Marriage of a woman after the death of her first husband or after her divorce is what was forbidden. The exception was if the woman’s husband died before they had children (Deut. 25:5-16). This shows how seriously Yahweh takes the lineage of a family and prevention of a woman and a man’s land from being lost. This verse also forbids the taking of another woman as a rival wife, a direct forbidding of polygamy.

18:19-20 These verses establish the middle boundary of marriage and protect against treating sex as a mere desire to be gratified while married. The loss of blood is unnatural and considered unclean; thus, to have sex with a woman during her menstrual period renders one unclean as well. Wanting to violate this command of Yahweh simply to have sex shows that the act is just about gratifying one’s desires. Yahweh also strictly forbids having affairs with one’s neighbor, which includes any Israelite. This is the most basic violation of marriage but also the most offensive.

18:21-23 These verses establish the outer boundary of marriage and the family and protect against practicing unnatural acts that destroy the makeup of a culture. First, Yahweh forbids the sacrifice of children, which seems out of place in this context, but the willingness to kill one’s child is a violation of the family and the beginning of other sins to follow. Offerings to Molech is condemned in other places (Lev. 20:2-5; 1 Kgs. 11:7; 2 Kgs. 23:10; Jer. 32:35). Offerings to Molech involved child sacrifices (Deut. 12:31; 18:10).

“The remnants of Molk-sacrifices have been found in North Africa, and there is evidence to suggest that it derived from Phoenicia. It has often been supposed that these sacrifices involved throwing the children alive into the flames. De Vaux points out that only one contemporary description of Carthaginian practice may imply this; the others state that the

⁷⁵ See Bob Deffinbaugh. *Leviticus: Sacrifice and Sanctification*, pp. 104-09.

babies were killed first. He suggests that this custom was practiced in Israel only from about the seventh century B.C., at about the time this part of Leviticus was being composed on normal critical theory. Since he wrote, evidence of child sacrifice has been discovered in Jordan from the period of the Conquest. Interestingly it comes from a temple at Amman, in the territory of the Ammonites, whose deity was Molech according to 1 K. 11:7.”⁷⁶

Yahweh also forbids homosexuality, for this goes against the purpose of marriage established in Gen. 2:24 of a man and a woman becoming one flesh in order to have children (Gen. 1:28). The homosexuality of the ancient Near East was not a matter of identity and sexual preference but, rather, a way to exercise dominion over another. If a male wanted to demonstrate his authority over another, he would rape another man to humiliate him and force him under his authority. To be the active (dominant) homosexual was a sign of power, and to be the passive male was a sign of weakness. This mentality is seen today in prison sex. What makes this sin so grievous is not just the unnatural union but that sex, which was meant to bind two people together as one flesh, is being used to exercise one’s power to subjugate another. This goes completely against the nature of Yahweh as one who has commanded us to serve one another and love our neighbor. Yahweh states that this sin is an abomination. The word *abomination* comes from a Hebrew root word which means “to hate” or “abhor.” The word is used for other sins and refers to all the sins talked about in this section (Lev. 18:26, 27, 29, 30).

Finally, Yahweh forbids sexual union with an animal. Once again, this violates the natural union of marriage that Yahweh had in mind, but it also lowers the uniqueness and authority of humanity that Yahweh instilled in us as those who were to have dominion over the creation and animals (Gen. 1:26-28). Once a culture accepts the previous two acts, bestiality is the next perversion to follow and the sign that a culture has truly fallen.

Homosexuality and bestiality were practiced among all the people of the ancient Near East. It had gotten to be so prevalent that people thought that if one dreamed of having sex with a spouse or someone of the opposite sex, then something *bad* was going to happen. But if they dreamed of having sex with someone of the same sex and especially with certain animals, then something *good* was going to happen.

Once a culture accepts the violation of the inner boundary, the middle and outer boundary will soon be violated, and soon the culture will collapse. This has been demonstrated in culture after culture throughout history.

18:24-30 The consequence for a nation violating these laws is being “vomited” out of the land. The punishment for the Canaanite nations committing these sins was removal from the land, and Yahweh would bring the same punishment on the Israelites if they practiced these sins. Here, Yahweh shows that He is just and consistent in His expectations and treatment of all the nations.

The Second Testament writers restated the laws on incest (1 Cor. 5:1-5), adultery (Rom. 13:9), idolatry (1 Cor. 10:7-11; Rev. 2:14), and homosexuality (Rom. 1:27; 1 Cor. 6:9). They are binding on us who live under the New Covenant.

“The reason why these laws apply to us and others do not, lies in our situation. Man’s moral predicaments change very little with time. We still need guidelines to regulate man’s treatment of his fellow men. But the believer’s situation with regard to salvation has altered

⁷⁶ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 261.

drastically; there is no need to continue with animal sacrifice now that the true Lamb of God has appeared.”⁷⁷

19:1-37 Lev. 19 covers a variety of topics so that the modern reader finds difficulty in seeing any reason to its organization. The commands are grouped together by a loose association of ideas rather than logical arrangement. The phrase “I am Yahweh your God” or “I am Yahweh” at the end of each paragraph provides structure to this chapter. All ten commandments are quoted or alluded to and sometimes developed in a new way.

19:1-4 The central thought in this section is the statement “You must be holy because I, Yahweh your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:2). The reason and goal for obeying these laws is so that one may be holy just like their God Yahweh is holy because He is the only sovereign God over creation.

“Holiness is thus not so much an abstract or mystic idea, as a regulative principle in the everyday lives of men and women... Holiness is thus attained not by flight from the world, nor by monk-like renunciation of human relationships of family or station, but by the spirit in which we fulfill the obligations of life in its simplest and commonest details: in this way—by doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God—is everyday life transfigured.”⁷⁸

These laws deal with one’s obedience to Yahweh. If one cannot respect or obey the two things that gave you life, God and parents, then one will not be able to respect anything else in life. Love and obedience to Yahweh and one’s parents are the foundation to a moral government and society.

19:5-8 The fellowship offering was the only offering wherein the Israelite was allowed to eat the meat. Yahweh reminds His people that all the offerings are about worshiping Him, even the one that they are allowed to take home.

19:9-10 Yahweh required that the corners of one’s field be left unharvested and that any grain dropped while gathering be left for the poor to gather up. Through this system Yahweh not only provided the poor with food to eat, but He also provided them with work so that they would value what they had received.

19:11-16 Yahweh commanded His people to treat their neighbors with respect and love and to deal honestly with each other. Not only were they to treat each other with love, but they were to go out of their way to do it. A slight delay in mentioning “neighbor” in these commands for the third time should make the reader alert to the great command. Yahweh especially warns against mistreating the disadvantaged and the oppressed. But there is also the warning of not favoring the poor over the rich. The point is that all are to be treated with love and shown justice because all are valued by Yahweh.

19:17-18 These verses show that the Mosaic Law did not deal just with external behavior. When Jesus Christ commented on Lev. 19:18 in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:43), He did not invest it with a new spiritual meaning. He corrected the Pharisees’ interpretation of it, which had limited it to external action. The point is that there are better approaches than taking your neighbor to court or hating them. One should talk to them and love them sacrificially, for this is how Yahweh treated Israel. You are to treat them the way that you would want to be treated. The

⁷⁷ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 265.

⁷⁸ J. H. Hertz. *Leviticus*, p. 192.

beauty of this command is that humans are all selfish and seek their own good. Thus, we are to treat people as if they were ourselves. Even if people take advantage, we are to love them, for this is what we would want for ourselves. The basis for this is that Yahweh is our God. This implies both He will take care of us when we love others and that we are to love this way because He loves us this way.

19:19 Just as Yahweh wanted His people to be separate from the cultures around them, He also wanted them to look different in the way they dressed and worked in their fields.

19:20-22 Often, slave girls would be foreigners, which is why it is inserted here after the ban on mixtures. Yahweh protected the rights of slaves, even though in the cultures surrounding Israel slaves had no right and were seen merely as property. It was not marriage with a slave that was forbidden but adultery with a slave girl who belonged to another man. Engaged was the same as married. The reason given for this exemption was because she was not free.

19:23-25 Allowing a fruit tree to go unharvested for three years allows for much better fruit production in the many years to follow. Babylonia law says that it took four years for an orchard to develop its potential. This would require patience and trust in Yahweh for a greater harvest by ignoring the first year's fruit.

19:26-32 Yahweh commanded Israel to abstain from the pagan practices of the Canaanite culture that were associated with their religious and sexual practices. Tattoos and the cutting of the hair and beard were associated with their priests and temple prostitutes. Israel was to trust in Yahweh who made His will known through the prophets or through the Urim and Thummim (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8).

19:33-37 Yahweh was concerned with how the Israelites treated not only each other but also the foreigners. The whole point of Yahweh's blessing Abraham and his descendants to be a great nation that was blessed was so that they could be a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1-3). Yahweh allowed Israel to be slaves in a foreign land so that they would be compassionate towards the foreigners when remembering what it was like.

“While some of these laws are inapplicable nowadays because our society is so different from ancient Israel's, others are no longer relevant to us because of the changed theological situation under the New Covenant. This is clear in the case of the sacrificial laws (vv. 5-8) because animal sacrifice has no further role after Christ's death. The law on mixtures (v. 19) is also theologically irrelevant in the Church situation. It is a law like that on unclean animals (ch. 11), which symbolized Israel's separateness from the nations. God's Church includes men of every nation and tongue and it is no longer necessary, therefore, to preserve those laws which typified the uniqueness and purity of Israel. But man is still called to imitate God (Matt. 5:48; 1Cor. 11:1), to ‘be holy, for I am holy’ (Lev. 19:2; cf. 1 Pet. 1:16). The detailed application of these imperatives may change from age to age, but the fundamental principles of holy living remain unaltered.”⁷⁹

“Since the church contains people of every nation it is no longer necessary for Christians to observe the laws that typified Israel's uniqueness among the other nations. Nevertheless God still calls Christians to imitate Himself (cf. Matt. 5:48; 1 Cor. 11:1), to ‘be holy, for I am

⁷⁹ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, pp. 274-275.

holy' (1 Pet. 1:16). Application of the imperatives in this chapter is different for Christians, but the fundamental principles of holy living remain the same."⁸⁰

20:1-27 Most of the subjects dealt with in Lev. 20 have already been covered in Lev. 18-19. Leviticus 19-20 specified correct behavior, while Leviticus 20 sets forth the punishments for disobedience of the commands given in the previous two chapters. These verses contain 14 laws, which conclude with an appeal for holiness on the part of the nation when they take possession of the land of Canaan (Lev. 20:22-26). After this conclusion, the prohibition of mediums and spiritists (Lev. 20:6) is restated (Lev. 20:27).

“The difference between the laws in this chapter and previous ones lies in their form. Those in chs. 18-19 are apodictic in form; that is, they forbid or command certain types of behavior but they rarely indicate what the consequences of disregarding these rules would be. In contrast, the laws in this chapter are casuistic; that is, they state what must be done should one of the apodictic rules be broken. They set out what will befall a law-breaker in such a case. In this way they supplement and reinforce what is found in earlier chapters.”⁸¹

The punishments for these different sins are death, burning, or being cut off from the community. This shows how seriously Yahweh took these violations of His commands. If a person breaks the Law, he does so knowingly and so cannot object to the death penalty. Where in certain respects the First Testament Law was much more lenient than that of the neighboring nations, it was stricter regarding offenses against religion and family life.

Leviticus 20 ends with an exhortation and warnings to obey Yahweh's commands. Israel was to live in a way totally unique from the nations that surrounded them so that they might experience life and blessing in a way that the other nations did not. Through this, the other nations would be attracted to the God who gave life and blessings to the nation of Israel. Just as the Canaanites were to be removed from the land for their sins, so Israel would possess the Promised Land to the extent that they maintained their holiness.

⁸⁰ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Leviticus*, p. 71.

⁸¹ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 277.

C. The Condition of the Priest Within the Community (21:1–22:33)

This section lays out the additional commands for holiness that were required of the priests. All the people of Israel were to be holy before Yahweh, but the priests had higher standards because they had the privilege of a closer relationship to Yahweh as well as greater responsibilities. This section also discusses the requirements for the sacrificial animals; these animals were the priests of the animal world in that their blood atoned for the sins of the people. Many of the deformities that kept a priest from offering a sacrifice (Lev. 21:18-20) were the same as those that kept an animal from being a suitable sacrifice (Lev. 22:20-24). As clean and unclean animals were symbolic of Jews and Gentiles, so sacrificial animals were symbolic of the priesthood. The statement “for I am Yahweh who sanctifies them” (or a similar phrase) closes each of the six subsections (Lev. 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32). The only other place in Leviticus this phrase is used is in Lev. 20:8.

21:1-5 The priests were not allowed to touch a dead body (except for a close relative), which would render them unclean and unable to serve in the sanctuary. Yahweh emphasizes how important purity is—but not at the cost of one’s relationships.

The priests were not allowed to shave their heads or beards or mark their body in the way of the pagan priests. They were not only to act differently but also to look different; there was to be no confusion between the two in any way.

21:6-15 The priests were to maintain purity in their family by marrying a wife who was worthy and pleasing to Yahweh. He was not allowed to marry a divorced woman. However innocent the divorced woman was, her reputation was likely to have been affected by the divorce. The holiness of the priest’s family and personal life had bearing on his holiness in the sanctuary. The holiness of his family was so important that the role of the priest as parent was just as important as being a priest to the nation. His holiness in the tabernacle was not to take precedence over the holiness of his family. Likewise, the conduct of the family is noticed by the world, and, as the representative of Yahweh, bad conduct reflects badly on Yahweh and His nation.

“Very awful is your responsibility if you diminish your zeal, love, spirituality, by marrying one who has more of earth and a present world in her person and spirit, than of heaven and a coming eternity.”⁸²

21:16-24 The priests were not allowed to have physical defects if they were to serve in the sanctuary. The sacrificial animals were the priests of the animal world; therefore, many of the deformities that prevented the priests from offering sacrifices (Lev. 21:18-20) were the same as those that disqualified an animal from being offered up as a sacrifice (Lev. 22:20-24). Handicapped priests were not inferior spiritually; rather, physical wholeness represented spiritual wholeness, and the priest’s duties required completeness since the priest stood between Yahweh and the people.

22:1-9 Leviticus 22 contains 28 laws that deal with circumstances that might render a priest unclean for serving in the sanctuary. These verses state that the priests could become defiled in the same way as the layperson of Israel. Though the priests had extra requirements, they were not exempt or above any of the laws that the people of Israel had to follow.

⁸² Andrew A. Bonar. *A Commentary on Leviticus*, p. 375.

These non-functioning priests were still allowed to eat the priestly food. But these verses establish the circumstances under which the priest may neither officiate at the sacrifices nor eat the priestly food.⁸³

22:10-16 No layperson was allowed to eat of the meat of the sacrifice that the priest offered to Yahweh—except for members of the priest’s household. In this way, being under his headship sanctified the priest’s family. This protected the sacrifice from becoming mundane or ordinary.

22:17-25 Just as the priests were to be without any kind of defect, so were the animal sacrifices to be without defect. Something that is not clean, whole, healthy, or pure cannot be purified and atoned for by a sacrifice that is also not whole, healthy, or pure. In freewill offerings, minor blemishes did not matter; a castrated animal was never to be offered up.

22:26-33 These laws specified the age of the animal as a sacrificial offering. The Israelites were not to offer oxen, sheep, or goats as sacrifices until these animals were at least eight days old. Nor were the priests to slay parent animals on the same day as their offspring. The reason may have been to keep sacred the relationship that Yahweh had established between parent and offspring

“These chapters like many others in this book form the background to much NT teaching. Christ is both perfect priest (21:17-23; Heb. 7:26) and perfect victim (22:18-30; Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22). His bride (cf. 21:7-15) is the Church, whom he is sanctifying to make her ‘without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish’ (Eph. 5:27; cf. Rev. 19:7-8; 21:2).”⁸⁴

⁸³ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 294.

⁸⁴ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 296.

D. Yahweh's Festivals (23:1–24:23)

In this section, Yahweh commanded Israel to follow the Sabbath and seven additional festivals set apart as holy and for worship of Him. There were four spring festivals, each of which foreshadowed the first coming of Jesus, and three fall festivals, each of which foreshadowed the second coming of Jesus. The repetitive familiarity of the weekly Sabbath made it easy to take it for granted. But the festivals and Sabbatical years interrupted the weekly routine and introduced variety into the worship of Yahweh. These became a reminder of what Yahweh had done for them and of the need to rest with Yahweh. During these seven festivals were six days of rest: the first and seventh day of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, the Day of Atonement, the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, and the day after the Feast of Tabernacles. These were known as high Sabbaths. This festival calendar was for the lay person. The description of the animals to be sacrificed is brief compared to that of the festival calendar (Num. 28-29) for the priests.

Israel had two calendars: one civil and one religious. The religious calendar began with the month of Nisan. Yahweh commanded Israel that Nisan was to mark the beginning of the new year at the first celebrated Passover, the night before they left Egypt (Ex. 12:1-2).

Hebrew Calendar ⁸⁵					
Month	Sacred Year	Civil Year	Day/Festival	Modern Calendar	Agricultural Season
Nisan	1	7	1 New Moon 14 Passover 15-21 Unleavened Bread 17 Firstfruits	Mar–Apr	Spring equinox, latter rains, flood season, barley season, flax harvest
Iyyar	2	8		Apr–May	Dry season, apricots
Sivan	3	9	7 Feast of Weeks	May–Jun	Wheat harvest, early figs and grapes
Tammuz	4	10		Jun–Jul	Hot dry season, grape harvest
Ab	5	11		Jul–Aug	Intense heat, olive harvest
Elul	6	12		Aug–Sept	Dates and summer figs
Tishri	7	1	1 Feast of Trumpets 10 Day of Atonement 15-21 Feast of Tabernacles	Sept–Oct	Early rains, plowing, seed time
Heshvan	8	2		Oct–Nov	Rains, winter figs, wheat and barley sown
Chislev	9	3	25 Dedication	Nov–Dec	Winter begins, green pastures
Tebeth	10	4		Dec–Jan	Rains, snow on high ground
Shebat	11	5		Jan–Feb	Almond trees blossom
Adar	12	6	15 Feast of Purim	Feb–Mar	Spring, latter rains, citrus fruit harvest

⁸⁵ Don J. Davis. *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, p. 150.

The Weekly Sabbath

23:1-3 In contrast to the other feasts, which occurred only once a year, the Sabbath was a weekly observance. Yahweh had already commanded Israel to obey the Sabbath earlier in His Law (Ex. 20:8-11; 31:13-17; 35:2-3; Lev. 19:3). It is included in this list because it was a day to be set apart as holy, like the other festivals. Likewise, the Sabbaths begin and make up many of the festivals that follow. The Sabbath was a day on which the people gathered together to remember the work that Yahweh had done in order that they may have rest. This was not celebrated in the tabernacle; rather, the people gathered around the tabernacle in their own dwellings.

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread

23:4-8 Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are technically two separate festivals, but because they fall in the same week, they were often celebrated as one festival. Passover got its name because it was first celebrated the night that Yahweh *passed over* the firstborn males of all families who had sacrificed a lamb in their place (Heb. 11:28). Their faith in Yahweh, that He would do what He promised, is what saved them that night. Ex. 12:14 states, “you will celebrate it perpetually as a lasting ordinance,” meaning that those who belong to Yahweh are to celebrate this festival forever.

Yahweh required each family on the tenth day of the month of Nisan to choose a male lamb that was spotless and healthy to be sacrificed in place of the family. For four days, the lamb would be inspected for imperfections, and on the fourteenth day it would be sacrificed. (Note that this is the exact day of the month on which Christ was sacrificed.) The blood of the lamb would be placed on the door frame and above and to either side of the door. The lamb is a typological symbol of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ (Jn. 1:29, 36; 1 Cor. 5:6-8; 1 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 7:10; 21:22; 22:21). Just as the lamb would die in place of the family for their sins in Egypt, so Christ would die for the sins of the world (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8; Gal. 1:3-4; Heb. 9:24-27; 1 John 2:2). The blood that covers the door to their house, marking them as purified, is a foreshadowing and symbol of the blood of Christ that covers our hearts and purifies us (Lev. 17:11; John 19:24; Heb. 9:24-27; 1 John 2:1; 5:6). The absence of yeast was symbolic of the absence of sin, because the blood was cleansing them of their sins. The bitter herbs—perhaps endive, chicory, and/or other herbs native to Egypt—would later remind the Israelites who ate them of the bitter experiences of life in Egypt.

The Unleavened Bread festival would last from the fourteenth day of the month to the twenty-first day. It would be a time of removing all yeast from their houses and eating bread without yeast—to make the Israelites aware of their sin. Yahweh emphasizes the seriousness of the festival by stating that those who do not participate will be cut off from Him and removed from the community. There is no salvation for those who are cut off from Yahweh. Once again, Yahweh says of the Unleavened Bread festival in Ex. 12:17, “keep this day perpetually as a lasting ordinance,” emphasizing that this too is to be practiced forever.

It was Passover and the Unleavened Bread festival that Christ fulfilled when He celebrated in the upper room with His disciples, which has since come to be known as the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22:17-20; 1 John 14; Cor. 11:23-29). Christ stated that He was the lamb—that the bread was his body and the wine His blood, broken and given for them.

The Feast of Firstfruits

23:9-14 The Feast of Unleavened Bread ended with the Feast of Firstfruits, which was celebrated on the day after the Sabbath that followed Passover. Firstfruits was not to be celebrated until Israel entered the Promised land, and then it would celebrate the first fruits of the barley harvest (the first harvest of the year). The people were to offer up the first fruits of their barley harvest both as an acknowledgement that it was Yahweh who had given them the land and the harvest and as a demonstration of trust that He would provide more. The Israelites also offered a lamb, flour, and wine, all representing Yahweh's provisions of spiritual and physical food and drink for His people.

Christ died on the day of the Passover feast, and it was on the very day of Firstfruits that He was raised from the dead; thus, He himself became the "first fruits" from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20) with the promise that we would follow Him in our own resurrections and into heaven (the Promised Land).

The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost)

23:15-22 The Feast of Weeks was celebrated at the end of the spring harvest, 50 days after Passover (specifically, the day after the seventh Sabbath). This day celebrated the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, and the Israelites would offer up the first fruits of the wheat harvest in the same manner as they had previously with the barley harvest. Thus, this became the second firstfruits offering to Yahweh of the harvest season. This was the only festival wherein the Israelites were commanded to eat bread baked with yeast (a symbol of sin) in it.

This feast was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit indwelt the disciples for the first time. In this way, the Law that had been given to the Hebrews at Mount Sinai was now written on the hearts of the disciples in fulfillment of what the prophets had said (Jer. 31:31-34; Joel 2:28-32; Ezek. 11:17-21). Thus, the believer becomes a second firstfruits resurrection from the dead through the death and resurrection of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (2 Thess. 2:13; James 1:18; Rev. 14:4).

The Feast of Trumpets

23:23-25 The next three festivals were celebrated in the seventh month of the religious calendar.

"The other main group of festivals falls in the seventh month of the year (September-October). In this month the dry hot summer draws to an end, the grapes and olives are picked, and the Israelite starts to look forward to the coming of the rains. In a good year these would begin in October and last until March. The seventh month, then, marked the end of the agricultural year and the beginning of a new one. Farm work was at a minimum and there was time to take stock spiritually and materially. The festivals in this month have a more solemn flavor than those in spring. Four extra sabbaths are prescribed in the space of one month including the most holy day of atonement (vv. 25, 28, 35, 36)."⁸⁶

The Feast of Trumpets was celebrated on the first day of the seventh month and was a day on which the people of Israel gathered as a nation and presented themselves to Yahweh for repentance. This was signaled by the priests blowing a long and large ram's horn (shophar) that produced a dull, far-reaching tone.

⁸⁶ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 305.

It is not clear how this feast will be fulfilled in the second coming of Christ, but it will have something to do with the blowing of a trumpet and the gathering together of His people. We are told in the Second Testament that a trumpet will sound, calling all believers to meet Christ in the air (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16-17). It will also assemble the Israelites and herald the Day of Yahweh, when He will again resume His dealings with His people Israel in Daniel's seventieth week (Jer. 32:37).

The Day of Atonement

23:26-32 This day was described in far greater detail earlier, in Lev. 16, more for the priests' benefit. Here, the responsibilities of the average Israelite are explained. This day was a fast rather than a feast, and the people were to "humble" themselves before Yahweh in repentance and atonement for their sins. The sacrifices on this day atoned for all the sins of ignorance and only lasted for the year ahead. This enabled Yahweh to dwell with the people through the tabernacle for another year.

Christ fulfilled this in a small way when He came, died on the cross, and became our sin offering and atonement. But it will not be until His second coming that Yahweh will purify His people who have returned to Him in repentance and self-affliction as a result of His chastening during the Tribulation period (Zech. 12:10; 13:1; cf. Heb. 9:28). It is on this day that we will experience the final and complete atonement for our sins.

The Feast of Tabernacles

23:33-44 On the Feast of Tabernacles, the people built booths out of branches and lived under these for the duration of this eight-day festival as a reminder of their life in the wilderness. They presented many offerings during this holiday (Num. 29:12-38), which revolved around the harvest of grapes. This was a week during which they looked back at the life of slavery from which Yahweh had delivered them, praised Him for the tabernacle and His glory that dwelt with them, and looked forward to the day that Yahweh would bring the fullness of His kingdom and glory on earth.

Christ gave a glimpse of this when He came and tabernacled with us (Jn. 1:14) in His first coming and revealed His glory to John, James, and Peter on the day of Tabernacles (Matt. 17:1-8). But this will be fully fulfilled in His second coming through His reign on the redeemed earth and Jerusalem (Zech. 14:16; Rev. 21).

Regulations for the Lampstand and Table of Bread

24:1-9 The Israelites were not only to offer themselves to Yahweh on special days of the year, but they were to worship and serve Him every day of the year and offer up their oil and grain to maintain the lampstand and the table of showbread. The daily refueling and continual burning of the lamps and the provision of bread for the Table of Showbread to Yahweh represented the daily sanctification of the people to Yahweh.

Other Regulations

24:10-16 There are no clear structural markers for this story that are characteristic of Leviticus. The only explanation for its placement is that it happened chronologically after the instructions for the Lampstand and table of showbread were given to Moses. This story illustrates how Yahweh regarded those who despised the very standards of holiness that He was giving.

The sin that the man committed was not that he said Yahweh's name but that he was using Yahweh's name as a curse brought the death penalty. It brought guilt on the hearers as well. The whole community had to lay their hands on the offender's head. His death would atone for his and their own guilt. It serves as an example to judges in the future on how to rule similar court cases.

“The emphasis of the narrative is that the ‘whole congregation’ was responsible for stoning the blasphemer (v. 14). This may be the reason why there is a reminder of the penalty for murder (*lex talionis*) just at this point in the narrative. The narrative thus sets up a contrast between the whole congregation's acting to take the life of a blasphemer and a single individual's (acting as an individual) taking ‘the life of a human being’ (v. 17). Thus the writer has made an important distinction between capital punishment and murder. Capital punishment was an act of the whole community, whereas murder was an individual act.”⁸⁷

24:17-23 The legal principle of limiting retaliation of an injury (an eye for an eye, vv. 19-21, the *lex talionis*, or law of retaliation) is an example of Yahweh's forbidding a sort of vengeance that was not only normal but expected in the ancient Near East. If a crime had been committed against someone, it was expected that the injured person hurt the offending person and their family in a worse way in order to exercise authority and strength over the other (this is still common in the Near East). In the Mosaic Law, Yahweh *limited* the amount of retaliation that His people could take; the punishment must fit the crime. The principle of the *eye for eye* was just a formula. This punishment was not applied literally by Yahweh in His laws. It meant that compensation appropriate to the loss incurred must be paid out.

“The ‘eye for an eye’ legal policy... is paralleled in the Code of Hammurabi [an eighteenth century B.C. king of Babylon], but there it operated only in the same social class. For a slave to put out a noble's eye meant death. For a noble to put out a slave's eye involved [only] a fine. In Israel its basic purpose was to uphold equal justice for all and a punishment that would fit the crime. The so-called law of retaliation was intended to curb excessive revenge due to passion and to serve as a block against terror tactics.”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, pp. 360-61.

⁸⁸ G. Herbert Livingston. *The Pentateuch in Its Cultural Environment*, pp. 176-77.

E. The Sabbath and Jubilee Years (25:1-55)

In this section, Yahweh gives the laws that gave rest to the land, provided by the Sabbatical Years and the Year of Jubilee. Just as the people belonged to Yahweh, so did the land. And just as Yahweh's work of redemption provided rest for the people, so the people were to provide rest for the land and not to work it to death. Israel was to do for the land (creation) as He had done for them. 2 Chron. 36:21 implies that the sabbatical year was never practiced.

The main purpose of these laws was to prevent the utter ruin of the debtors. If a person could not pay a debt, he would sell his land and even his life to work it off. If left unchecked, this system could lead to great social divisions wherein rich land owners oppressed landless peasants. Isa. 5:8; Amos 2:6. Lev. 25 forbade anyone selling their land or themselves permanently. They could only rent their land out for a maximum of forty-nine years. Thus, about once in a person's lifetime the slate was wiped clean.

“The central theme of this last set of instructions is that of restoration. Israel's life was to be governed by a pattern of seven-year periods, Sabbath years. After seven periods of seven years, in the Year of Jubilee, there was to be total restoration for God's people.”⁸⁹

The Sabbatical Year

25:1-7 Just as the people were to rest on the seventh day of the week, so they were supposed to allow the land to rest every seven years. And just as they were to trust Yahweh to provide for them on the seventh day of the week, so they were to trust that He would provide enough abundance in the sixth year that it would last through the seventh year (Sabbatical Year) and through the eighth year until the harvest of that year came. Not only was this an act of redemption for the land and trust in Yahweh's care and provision, but the people were also to regard the crops that grew naturally during the sabbatical year as an offering to Yahweh and were not to harvest them. However, Yahweh permitted the slaves, hired people, foreign residents, aliens, cattle, and animals to eat freely of what was His.

“From this, Israel, as the nation of God, was to learn, on the one hand, that although the earth was created for man, it was not merely created for him to draw out its powers for his own use, but also to be holy to the Lord, and participate in His blessed rest; and on the other hand, that the great purpose for which the congregation of the Lord existed, did not consist in the uninterrupted tilling of the earth, connected with bitter labour in the sweat of his brow (Gen. iii. 17, 19), but in the peaceful enjoyment of the fruits of the earth, which the Lord their God had given them, and would give them still without the labour of their hands, if they strove to keep His covenant and satisfy themselves with His grace.”⁹⁰

“In its overall plan, the Sabbath year was to be a replication of God's provisions for humankind in the Garden of Eden. When God created human beings and put them into the Garden, they were not to work for their livelihood but were to worship... So also in the Sabbath year, each person was to share equally in all the good of God's provision (Lev 25:6). In the Garden, God provided for the man and woman an eternal rest (cf. Gen 2:9, the Tree of Life; 3:22b) and time of worship, the Sabbath (Gen 2:3). The Sabbath year was a foretaste of

⁸⁹ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 361.

⁹⁰ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch*, 2:457. See N. P. Lemche, “The Manumission of Slaves - The Fallow Year - The Sabbatical Year - The Jubel Year,” *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (January 1976):38-59; and Don Blosser, “The Sabbath Year Cycle in Josephus,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1981):129-39.

that time of rest and worship. Here, as on many other occasions, the writer has envisioned Israel's possession of the 'good land' promised to them as a return to the Garden of Eden."⁹¹

The Year of Jubilee

25:8-12 The Year of Jubilee happened every fifty years, and not only was Israel supposed to let the land rest, but all property and land were to revert back to the original owners, debts were to be canceled, and slaves were to be set free. During this year, Yahweh brought the land back to the condition that He had intended it to be. In this way, the Year of Jubilee was a type of redemption for the people of Israel and for the land and was thus a taste of what the coming kingdom of Yahweh would bring. The Year of Jubilee did for the land what the Day of Atonement did for the people. The fact that the priests announced the Year of Jubilee on the Day of Atonement confirms this connection.

“Another possibility, suggested by Hoenig and tentatively adopted in my translation of v. 8, the forty-nine days of the seven cycles of sabbatical years shall be for you a year, is that the jubilee year was a very short 'year' only forty-nine days long, intercalated in the seventh month of the forty-ninth year. This short 'year' would function like February 29 in our leap years, and serve to keep the religious festivals, many of which were connected with harvesting, in step with the seasons.”⁹²

25:13-18 Yahweh commanded that if one did have to sell his land to another before the Year of Jubilee, then they were to deal honestly with each other and determine the price of the land based on how many years there were until the Year of Jubilee, when the land would be returned to the original owners without charge. One could not charge the same price for land one year before the Year of Jubilee as he could forty years before.

25:19-24 Yahweh promised that if they were faithful to Him in implementing the Year of Jubilee, He would provide enough abundance in the sixth year that it would last through the seventh year (Sabbatical Year) and through the eighth year until the harvest of that year came. Here, Moses emphasized that fact that the land ultimately belonged to Yahweh.

25:25-28 Yahweh also allowed for the principles of the Year of Jubilee to be implemented on an individual level any year before the Year of Jubilee through the kinsman redeemer. Any person who had to sell his land or himself could have his land or himself redeemed back through his kinsman redeemer. The kinsman redeemer was any relative (next of kin) who was willing and able to pay the price of either his relative's land that was being sold or his relative's debts that were causing him to be enslaved, in order to prevent the loss. The kinsman redeemer would then give the relative's land or free life back to him or her, free of charge. Christ fulfilled this by becoming our kinsman redeemer when He died on the cross—paying our debt and giving our lives back to us as a gift. He was able to do this only because He became human and, thus, our fellow brother.

25:29-34 If a person had sold a house within a walled city to another person, then he had one year to lay claim to it and redeem it back in the year of Jubilee. If the house was in a village, outside the walled city and connected to land, then it was treated like a field and immediately

⁹¹ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 361.

⁹² Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 319.

reverted back to the original owner. The houses of the Levites were not allowed to be sold because they had no land inheritance to support them.

25:35-43 If an Israelite owed another Israelite a debt so great that it caused him to be impoverished, then the Israelites were to support him and help him pay the debt. You were not allowed to charge interest to another Israelite. If an Israelite sold himself into servanthood, then he was to be treated like a hired worker. He and his family were to be released in the Year of Jubilee.

25:44-55 Foreign slaves were allowed to be enslaved for a lifetime. The reason they were treated differently was that they were not allowed to live free in the land if they still worshiped pagan gods, and thus corrupt the Israelites. If a foreigner converted to belief in Yahweh and joined the nation of Israel, then he or she was to be treated as an Israelite.

“Robert North discusses the lessons a Christian might learn from this chapter under four heads: social justice, social worship, personal values, and messianic typology. His discussion is difficult to improve on, and here some of his points are summarized.

Social justice

The jubilee was intended to prevent the accumulation of the wealth of the nation in the hands of a very few. Every Israelite had an inalienable right to his family land and to his freedom. If he lost them through falling into debt he recovered them in the jubilee. The biblical law is opposed equally to the monopolistic tendencies of unbridled capitalism and thorough-going communism, where all property is in state hands. By keeping land within a particular family, the jubilee also promoted family unity.

Social worship

The jubilee is presented in this chapter as an extension of the sabbath day and sabbatical year (vv. 3ff.). True religion is not opposed to a just society. Concern for the one should go hand in hand with concern for the other. The prophetic word ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’ (Hos. 6:6; Matt. 9: 13; 12:7) was a word to a society who thought God would be satisfied with sacrifice by itself. Had they paid attention to Leviticus, the men of Hosea’s day might not have made that mistake.

Personal virtues

‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev. 19: 18) is the all-embracing moral principle that inspires the jubilee legislation. The NT too recognizes that the rich have an obligation to give to the poor (e.g., 1 John 3: 17; Jas. 2: 15ff.). The jubilee also draws attention to the fleeting nature of man’s earthly abode: you are resident aliens and settlers with me (v. 23). Equally Christians must recognize that they are but pilgrims and sojourners here and look for another city ‘whose builder and maker is God’ (Heb. 11:10). Finally believers in both covenants are assured that those who put God’s will first will have all their physical needs provided (Lev. 25: 18ff.; cf. Matt. 6:25ff.).

Messianic typology

At Nazareth Jesus declared (Luke 4: 18-19):

‘He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.’

In Isa. 61: 1, from which Jesus was quoting, the word used for ‘release’ (*deror*) is the same as that found in Lev. 25:10. It seems quite likely, therefore, that the prophetic description of the ‘acceptable year of the Lord’ was partly inspired by the idea of the jubilee year. The messianic age brings liberty to the oppressed and release to the captives.

This age was inaugurated with Christ’s first coming (Luke 4:21). It will be completed by his second coming (Jas. 5: 1-8; cf. Luke 16: 19-31). The jubilee, then, not only looks back to God’s first redemption of his people from Egypt (Lev. 25:38, 55), but forward to the ‘restitution of all things,’ ‘for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells’ (Acts 3:21; 2 Pet. 3: 13).⁹³

⁹³ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, pp. 323-324.

F. Final Conditions of the Covenant (26:1-46)

After laying out the requirements of the Law, Yahweh now pronounced the blessings and curses that Israel would receive for their obedience or lack of obedience. These are similar to the ones in Ex. 23. However, Ex. 23 dealt with the conquest of Canaan, while these deal with Israel settled in the land. All covenant codes of the ancient world ended with blessings or curses for those who honored or violated the covenant. The difference is that Leviticus acknowledges only one God who will carry out these threats, whereas other nations listed many deities to execute judgement, in the god's region of influence. The curses are divided into six sections that begin with the phrases "if you will not listen to me" (Lev. 26:14, 18, 21, 23, 27) and "I will punish you seven times for your sins" (Lev. 26:16, 18, 21, 24, 28).

"In the ancient Near East it was customary for legal treaties to conclude with passages containing blessings upon those who observed the enactments, and curses upon those who did not. The international treaties of the second millennium BC regularly included such sections as part of the text, with the list of curses greatly outnumbering the promises of blessing. In the Old Testament this general pattern occurs in Exodus 23:25-33, Deuteronomy 28:1-68, and Joshua 24:20. The maledictions of Mesopotamian legal texts or the curses in the treaties of the Arameans, Hittites and Assyrians were threats uttered in the names of the gods, which had acted as witnesses to the covenants. That these threats could be implemented was part of the superstitious belief of people in the ancient Near East, and could have had some coincidental basis in fact. For the Israelites, however, there was no doubt that the God who wrought the mighty act of deliverance at the Red Sea will indeed carry out all that He has promised, whether for good or ill. Obedience to His commands is the certain way to obtain a consistent outpouring of blessing, whereas continued disobedience is a guarantee of future punishment."⁹⁴

26:1-13 Yahweh began with the physical and spiritual blessings that Israel would receive if they were obedient to Him. Physically, Yahweh promised Israel that He would provide rain that would make the land abundant in crops and that they would have peace and victory over their enemies. Spiritually, Yahweh would dwell with them and be their God in the same way that He was in their deliverance from Egypt. It is important to note that these are not the blessings for every single individual but for the nation as a whole. Yahweh never promised that nothing bad would ever happen to individual Jews, just that the nation would have abundance and peace. A reward of health, wealth, and prosperity to individuals for their obedience and faith has never been a promise of God (see Abel, Job, Abraham, Moses, the prophets, Daniel, Jesus, the apostles, and Heb. 11:32-40, 1 Pet. 1:3-9, James 1:2-18). Likewise, never has Yahweh promised these blessings to the Church; these were for Israel only. The Church has been promised spiritual blessing but never physical blessing (1 Pet. 2:11-25).

"The psalmists (e.g., Ps. 72) and the prophets (e.g., Isa. 11) look forward to a time when the promised blessings would become a reality. But it is Ezekiel who makes most use of Leviticus as a direct inspiration for his prophecies. He looks forward to a new age when God would send a faithful shepherd, like David, to save the people from wild beasts (Ezek. 34:25; cf. Lev. 26:6). In the New Covenant there will be abundant rain and harvests (Ezek. 34:26-27; cf. Lev. 26:4-5, 13). The people will not be oppressed by the nations (Ezek. 34:28; cf.

⁹⁴ R. K. Harrison. *Leviticus*, pp. 230-31.

Lev. 26:7 -8). They will be multiplied and fruitful (Ezek. 36:10-11; cf. Lev. 26:9). They shall become God's people, and his dwelling shall be with them (Ezek. 36:28; 37:24-27; cf. Lev. 26:2, 11-12).⁹⁵

26:14-33 Yahweh then followed the blessings with five stages of curses that Israel would receive if they did not obey Him. The first stage is disease in the land, lack of agricultural fruitfulness, and defeat by enemies. The second stage is that the land will be completely barren and not produce crops. The third stage is the death of their cattle and children. The fourth stage is that war, plagues, and famine will come upon them. The fifth stage is the destruction of their families and their deportation from the land into captivity. Here, Yahweh makes it clear that He takes obedience and holiness seriously. However, one can also see Yahweh's patience and grace throughout history. From the moment Israel left Egypt in 1446 BC, they never truly obeyed Yahweh as a nation (with the exception of Joshua's generation), and yet Yahweh did not bring the final two stages in their fullness upon Israel until the northern kingdom's deportation in 722 BC and the southern kingdom's in 586 BC.

26:34-38 Yahweh told Israel that if they disobeyed His commands regarding the Year of Jubilee, the length of their exile would be one year for every Year of Jubilee that they did not honor. The length of the Babylonian captivity was 70 years because the Israelites failed to observe 70 sabbatical years in the land (2 Chron. 36:21; Jer. 29:10). In fact, there is no record that Israel ever honored the Year of Jubilee.

“While we may look on these events merely as the unhappy side-effects of war, there is much more to them than that. They are a denial of all the hopes enshrined in the covenant with Abraham, that his descendants would become a great nation, inherit the land of Canaan, and so on (cf. Gen. 15, 17). They represent a reversal of the blessing in vv. 11-13 that God would be present with his people. Even the symbols of God's presence with his people, high places, incense altars, sanctuaries, and sacrifices producing soothing aromas will be destroyed (vv. 30-31).”⁹⁶

26:39-46 Yahweh ends the section of blessings and curses with the promise that no matter what the people of Israel did to anger Him, He would always restore them and bless them if they would merely repent of their sins, forsake their idols, and turn back to Him. This not only reinforces the main idea of the sacrificial system as a means of repentance to come into the presence of Yahweh, but it also emphasizes that life with Yahweh has always been about repentance, faith, and grace.

⁹⁵ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 330.

⁹⁶ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 332.

G. Vows and Tithes (27:1-34)

The book of Leviticus ends with the discussions of vows and tithes. Just as the blessing and cursing in the previous chapter were, in a sense, Yahweh's vows to the people, this chapter deals with the people's vows to Yahweh.

“The directions concerning vows follow the express termination of the Sinaitic lawgiving (chap. xxvi. 46), as an appendix to it, because vows formed no integral part of the covenant laws, but were a freewill expression of piety common to almost all nations, and belonged to the modes of worship current in all religions, which were not demanded and might be omitted altogether, and which really lay outside the law, though it was necessary to bring them into harmony with the demands of the law upon Israel.”⁹⁷

27:1-25 Yahweh neither commanded nor forbade the making of vows to Him. However, He did give regulations for how one was to make a vow and shows that He expected them to be kept. The people were allowed to vow themselves as well as their animals, houses, and fields to Yahweh. However, if they decided to go back on their vow, then they had to pay a high price to redeem back what they had vowed. Here, Yahweh listed the amount of money that was required in order to redeem a person, animal, house, or field. If someone were too poor to redeem their vow or they had vowed an unclean animal, or land that they had purchased from other then they were to bring themselves, the unclean animal, or the purchased field to the priest for him to determine a redemption price for them to pay.

The average wage of a worker in biblical times was about one shekel per month.⁹⁸ The price for redeeming a male who had been vowed was fifty shekels, which was a reasonable price for an adult male. By fixing a high price on the breaking of vows, Yahweh may have been discouraging the making of rash vows. (Gen. 28:20-22; Num. 21:2; Jonah 2:9). The high cost of the redemption not only shows how seriously Yahweh takes a vow, but it also foreshadows the great cost that will be required for Him to redeem us through Christ.

27:26-27 The exception to what could be vowed to Yahweh was one's firstborn son. The reason for this was that the firstborn sons already belonged to Yahweh from the Passover in Ex. 12.

27:28-29 Another exception was anything that Yahweh had already claimed as His own or had put a ban on in battle. In divine judgement, all the Canaanites and their property were devoted to Yahweh (Num. 21:2; Deut. 7:2; 1 Sam. 15) and therefore could not be claimed by an Israelite or vowed to Yahweh.

27:30-34 The final exception were the tithes that Yahweh demanded from the people. The tithe was not allowed to be vowed to Yahweh and redeemed back because He commanded that it be paid whether a vow had been made or not.

“With these laws on vows and tithes Leviticus closes. On first reading it seems a strange point at which to end. But the theme of vowing is in fact closely related to the principal concerns of the whole book. Men who dedicate themselves to God become as it were God's slaves, holy to the Lord. Some men, the priests, can indeed serve God in the sanctuary. Chs. 8-10 tell of the ordination of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood. Chs. 21-22 expound the qualities looked for in priests, qualities which symbolize the perfection and holiness of God.

⁹⁷ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch*, p. 2:479.

⁹⁸ See Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 338.

Those not of priestly stock can still serve God, indeed they must be holy for God is holy (11 :44- 45; 19:2; 20:7, 26). This theme runs through chs. 11-20: the elect people of God must visibly embody the character of God. In their choice of food, in sickness and in health, in their family life, in their honest and upright dealing, and in their love of neighbor, they show the world what God is like.

Vowed animals are intended for sacrifice: they too become holy when vowed. Sacrifice was the heart of OT worship, and Leviticus gives more precise directions about sacrificial procedures than any other part of Scripture, and also lists the occasions when animals had to be offered (chs. 1-7, 12-17. 22-23). Finally a man can dedicate land or property to God, recalling the jubilee legislation (ch. 25).

Thus this chapter in effect recapitulates and reminds us of the great themes that have engaged our attention in the rest of the book. Lev. 27 points out that holiness is more than a matter of divine call and correct ritual. Its attainment requires the total consecration of a man's life to God's service. It involves giving yourself, your family, and all your possessions to God."⁹⁹

“Be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy.”

⁹⁹ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*, pp. 342-343.

Conclusion

Genesis and Exodus taught that Yahweh is sovereign and relational. Leviticus taught that Yahweh is righteous and holy. Because of sin, humans cannot enter into the presence of Yahweh. Thus through the teachings of Leviticus Israel could live a life of purity and holiness so that they could have fellowship with Yahweh. Leviticus makes it very clear how serious sin is and how much Yahweh cannot tolerate sin. But it also teaches that Yahweh desires a relationship with humanity so much that He provided a way for them to become holy as He is holy and dwell with Him.

Exodus ended with Moses' inability to enter the tabernacle where Yahweh dwelt (Ex. 40:34-35) because of Israel's sin with the golden calf (Ex. 32). Now, through Yahweh's instructions on the sacrificial system and purity laws, Israel could become cleansed and return to a state of clean. It is through the Day of Atonement rituals (Lev. 16) that Israel was able to be purified of their sin and Yahweh could dwell with them another year. Thus, Numbers begins with Moses' ability to enter the tabernacle where Yahweh was (Num. 1:1). This is the whole point of Leviticus: to instruct Israel on how to be holy and live holy lives so that they can live and walk with Yahweh.

Christ later came as the sacrificial lamb in order to make purification for sins once and for all. Through his sacrifice and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the believer today becomes the dwelling place of Yahweh. However, though we have been justified, we are still defiled by sin and need to pursue a life of sanctification. The modern reader must interpret the teachings of Leviticus through the work of Christ and translate them into our modern culture through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not come to do away with the Law but to fulfill it and make it possible to live it out in our lives (Matt. 5:17; Rom. 8:1-4). The Law has now been written on our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and we must listen to Him so that we can be holy as He is holy (Jer. 31:31-33).

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