

LECTURE 4
LEVITICUS OVERVIEW
WORSHIP OF A COVENANT PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION

1. Name

2. Theme

3. Purpose

4. Key verse

5. Key truths

- God is holy, and he requires holiness from His people.
- God's people invariably failed to keep requirements of holiness but temporary atonement could be found in the sacrificial system.
- God called his people to pursue holiness in every aspect of their lives out of gratitude for the mercy he had shown to them
- God offered wondrous blessings and threatened at judgment so that his people would repent and offer vows of commitment to him .¹

I. AUTHOR

See "Lecture 1: Pentateuch Overview" for general view regarding Mosaic Authorship of Pentateuch. There are some additional points specifically related to the critical view of authorship of Leviticus which we would like to address here.

A. STANDARD CRITICAL VIEWPOINT

Welhausen followed the Hegalian Evolutionary Model in his theory of the development of Israel's religion. He distinguished four alleged stages

1. Independent tribes

¹ Ibid., 160.

During the early or Patriarchal history, Israel's worship was free, individualistic, simple, and spontaneous.

2. Merging tribes

As the tribes began to merge in Mosaic times, the early individualism and spontaneity gave way to something more organized and united.

3. Unified tribes

With the formal unification of the tribes in the Davidic period, worship was even more centralized and organized.

4. Post-exilic nationalism

In the post-exilic era worship was ritualized and regulated in every area.

5. Critics Conclusion

Leviticus reveals a ritualized and regulated religion and so belongs to the post-exilic period. The Mosaic setting for the book is fictional.

6. Evangelical Response

- a. There is New Testament support for Mosaic authorship (Mat.8:4 and Lev.14:20, Lk.2:22 and Lev.12:2-8)
- b. Though not known to Wellhausen when he wrote, more recent research has shown that when Moses wrote there were other religions (eg., Ugarit) in the area with highly ritualized and organized worship.

With the discovery of other ancient law codes, such as the *Code of Hammurabi*, the fragments of the Sumerian laws of Lipit-Ishtar of Isin (about 1875 B.C.), those of Bilalama, king of Eshnunna (about 1940 B.C), it becomes increasingly apparent that some of the so-called P laws were strikingly similar to provisions enacted in the early second millennium, well before the age of Moses...With the recent publication of legal documents from the north Canaanite city of Ugarit, still further resemblances have been coming to light, even in the matter of technical terminology.²

- c. There are significant differences when the language and rituals of Leviticus are compared with post-exilic books such as Ezekiel, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah.
- d. There is evidence that Deuteronomy, Joshua and Samuel build upon Leviticus (e.g., Lev.17:10f, 1Sam.14:33-34).

B. MOSAIC AUTHORSHIP

The Evangelical view is that Moses wrote the book. God inspired him to recall previous revelations in Tabernacle (Lev.1:1f) and also previous events (Lev.8:1-10:20; 24:10-23).

While Leviticus never claims to be authored by Moses, the internal testimony indicates that its contents were mediated through him to the people. The book opens with the phrase "The LORD called unto Moses" (1:1), and the expression "The Lord said to Moses" occurs 56 times.

No other book in the Bible affirms divine inspiration so frequently as Leviticus. Under the heading of the verb *to speak* (*dibbēr*) alone, the concordance lists no less than thirty-eight occurrences of the statement that Jehovah spoke to Moses or to Aaron. Nothing could be clearer than that this entire sacrificial system was no invention of the Hebrew people (either in Moses' day or in the course of later centuries) but a direct revelation of God. Otherwise no affirmation of divine origin is to be trusted for any statement in the rest of Scripture.³

² G L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), Electronic Edition.

³ G L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), Electronic Edition.

II. DATE

The setting of Leviticus is Mt Sinai. The first generation of post-exodus Israel are on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land. The book was most likely written by Moses later on the plains of Moab, to teach the 2nd generation of post-exodus Israel how to live and worship in the Promised Land. The last event it mentions is the death of Nadab and Abihu which was after Sinai. Final composition then took place after Sinai but before the death of Moses.

III. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

1. The setting: Mt Sinai

2. The time period: one month

3. Laws and Rituals

4. Cultural Context

Archaeological research has discovered that all of Israel's neighbors in the ancient Near East had some form of sacrificial worship. The sacrificial terminology was similar and so were the purposes of sacrifice: to provide fellowship with the deity, to appease the gods, and to ensure continuance of divine favor.

However, there were certain important and fundamental differences.

- a. Unlike the Mesopotamians, the Israelites burned their sacrifices in fire.
- b. The Mesopotamians used the sacrificial animal as a means of clairvoyance. Priests believed that they could tell the future by studying the entrails of dead animals. Such practices were absent in Israel.
- c. The Israelite sacrificial system was based upon and bound up with their covenant relationship with God which has no parallel in the ancient Near East.
- d. Israel's neighbors had no concept of "holiness," a concept which greatly influenced Israel's sacrificial system. Indeed many of their neighbors rituals were morally degrading.
- e. Unlike their neighbors, not only did the sacred personnel, such as the King and/or priests, have access to the sacred precincts or to ritual instructions, but all the covenant people also, to some degree, had access to intimacy with God.

Although the sacrificial system seems strange and fallen to ours, it was part and parcel of Israel's cultural environment. We should not be surprised that she was comfortable using animal sacrifices

as a partnership of Yahweh. But we should also remember these striking differences between the way Israel and her neighbors practiced sacrifice.⁴

While there may be some general resemblances or analogies which can be pointed out between these Levitical regulations and the cultus practiced by other ancient Semites, there is a complete absence of the degrading and superstitious elements characterizing the worship of the idolatrous nations during the Old Testament age.⁵

IV. LITERARY ANALYSIS

1. Comparative Outlines

Wenham	Young	Pratt	Murray
Laws of sacrifice (1:1-7:38)	Removal of the defilement which separates man from God (1-16)	Regulations of sacrifices (1:1-7:38)	Holy worship inside the Tabernacle (1-10)
Institution of priests (8:1-10:20)		Regulations of priests (8:1-10:20)	
Uncleanness and treatment (11:1-16:34)	Restoration of the lost fellowship between man and God (17-27).	Regulations of uncleanness (11:1-16:34)	Holy living outside the Tabernacle (11-27)
Practical holiness (17:1-27:34)		General regulations of holy living (17:1-25:55)	
		Blessing and cursing (26:1-46)	
		Regulations of vow (27:1-29)	

⁴ B Arnold and B Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 119.

⁵ G L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), Electronic Edition.

J E Smith proposes the following structure:⁶

LEVITICUS (“THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE NATION”)			
THE WAY TO GOD Ch 1-7	THE WORK OF GOD Ch 8-15	THE WALK WITH GOD Ch 16-22	THE WORSHIP OF GOD Ch 23-27
Attaining Fellowship Through Worship		Maintaining Fellowship Through Practice	
SACRIFICE		SANCTIFICATION	
Ceremonial and Physical Defilement		Moral and Spiritual Defilement	
CLEANSING		CLEAN LIVING	

2. Original Audience/Message

3. Literary Context

There is literary contrast and continuity.

a. Contrast

b. Continuity

⁶ J E Smith, *The Pentateuch* (Joplin, Mo.; College Press Pub. Co., 1993), Electronic Edition.

4. Genre

It is not difficult to deduce that the genre of Leviticus is law. However, all the laws have a narrative setting (the Tent of Meeting, ch1) setting it within the overall Pentateuchal genre of “instructional history.”

The single most obvious characteristic of the book is its clear and simple structure. The high incidence of law and ritual necessitates a straightforward presentation. The purpose of the book is to provide guidelines to priests and laypeople concerning appropriate behavior in the presence of a holy God, thus the emphasis is on communicating information, not on subtle or artificial literary plays. Accordingly, Leviticus is among the least literary of the Old Testament books. This judgment is not a slight on the book, because the book does not intend to stimulate the reader’s aesthetic imagination to the same level as do other biblical books. Its interest to the original audience as well as to the contemporary reader is found elsewhere, for instance, in its theological ramifications.⁷

5. Ancient Near Eastern Treaties

V. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

1. Theological progress

J E Smith highlights a progression of theological thought in the Pentateuch up to this point.⁸

GENESIS	EXODUS	LEVITICUS
God’s Remedy for Man’s Ruin	God’s Answer for Man’s Cry	God’s Provision for Man’s Need
The Seed of Woman (Gn.3:15)	The Blood of a Lamb (Ex 13–14)	Priest/Altar/Sacrifice
The Problem of Sin	The Possibility of Salvation	The Provision for Service

2. Theological Contrast

Although there is theological continuity with the preceding book, there is also contrast.

Exodus begins with enslaved sinners; Leviticus with redeemed saints. In the former book God got his people out of Egypt; in the latter, he got Egypt out of his people. Exodus is the book of deliverance emphasizing the fact of sacrifice; Leviticus is the book of dedication and sets forth the doctrine of sacrifice. In Exodus God speaks from the mount, and he approaches man. In Leviticus God speaks from the tent, and man learns to approach God. Exodus dwells at length on the erection of the Tabernacle while in Leviticus Tabernacle duties are set forth.⁹

3. Holiness

⁷ R Dillard and T Longman III, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 76

⁸ J E Smith, *The Pentateuch* (Joplin, Mo.; College Press Pub. Co., 1993), Electronic Edition.

⁹ J E Smith, *The Pentateuch* (Joplin, Mo.; College Press Pub. Co., 1993), Electronic Edition.

“Be holy, because I am holy” (11:45) is the theme of Leviticus. Human beings are meant to be like God in His character. That involves imitating God in daily life. The holiness of God involves His being the source of perfect life – life in its physical and moral dimensions. Animals offered to Him in sacrifice were to be free of defect (1:3), and priests who represented God to Israel and Israel to God were to be free of physical disabilities (21:17-23). Those who suffered discharges or disfiguring skin diseases were barred from worship until they were cured (chs 12-15). Physical health is seen to symbolize the perfection of divine life. But holiness is also an inward matter, one of attitudes resulting in moral behavior.¹⁰

Standing as motivation behind the various commands of holiness is the divine statement “I am the LORD your God” which occurs 40 times.

4. Ceremonial Law

In our discussion of Exodus we noted the threefold division of moral, civil and ceremonial law. We also guarded against too radical a separation of these codes, noting that it was more a threefold emphasis rather than distinction.

Some laws are both moral and civil, such as those against adultery, stealing, bearing false witness and the like. Others are both moral and ceremonial, such as laws against idolatry and Sabbath breaking. All these laws contain a moral dimension making the lines between the categories somewhat arbitrary. Furthermore, this approach to Old Testament law leads some Christians to take too lightly Paul's injunction in 2 Tim.3:16.¹¹

Although one verse near the end of the book ties all of Leviticus to the Sinai covenant (26:46), the emphasis in Leviticus is on the ceremonial law. Exodus emphasized the moral laws and their application to Israel's covenant life. Leviticus is more concerned with laws for covenant worship and ceremonial cleansing. The question for the modern believer is, how do these laws of sacrificial rites and ritual cleansing relate to others?

It is better to accept some laws of the Old Testament as broad and generally intended for all societies. Others are specific applications to Israelite culture and society that cannot be applied in the same way today to our Western society and culture. On the other hand, much of the world today is closer to ancient Israel than we may think. For the majority of the world's population, the specific applications of civil law are not so far removed from ancient Israel...The Bible invites us to examine the ancient Israel as the model and example. As we compare our situation to theirs, we accept Old Testament law as confirmed by Christ, and with the help of his Holy spirit and lessons learned in Church History the specifics of how we ought to love God and neighbor should become clear.¹²

¹⁰ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 161

¹¹ B Arnold and B Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 123.

¹² *Ibid.*, 123.

5. Atoning sacrifice

When God ordained sacrificial blood as the means for cleansing sin (17:11), He established the spiritual principle that life itself, not some lesser gift, must be returned to him for the purpose of atoning for sin. The exact meaning of the Hebrew word for atonement (*kipper*) is uncertain. But it somehow means the animal's sacrifice ransomed the sinner from the death of which the sinner deserved. The animal became the worshipper's substitute and lost his life in order for the sinner to live.¹³

Two emphases are apparent: sin must be pardoned and removed, and lost fellowship with God must be restored and preserved.

6. The divine presence

The end and purpose of the sacrifices was communion with God. The enjoyment of God's presence would be restored.

Every act of worship took place "before the Lord" (eg., 1:5) who dwelled with His people in the Tent of Meeting...Although God's presence is usually invisible, he did on special occasions become visible in a cloud of fire (9:23-24). It is the greatest of God's gifts that he deigns to dwell with his people (26:12).¹⁴

¹³ B Arnold and B Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 124.

¹⁴ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 160.

VI. NEW TESTAMENT ANALYSIS

1. Jesus Christ: the wedge and the bridge

2. The Character of God

God's holy presence is revealed as the source of holy life and holy love, thus foreshadowing the incarnation.

The holy God of Leviticus is shown in the Gospels to be Christ, who offers life, health and holiness to all who are willing to follow him.¹⁵

3. Typology

Here are vivid pictures illustrating wonderful truths about the Savior and his people. The Epistle to the Hebrews is the New Testament counterpart to Leviticus, containing the explanation of so many of the types found there. The manner in which that letter was composed suggests that it was not a new idea to understand the ceremonies of the Old Covenant as illustrations of something more glorious to come.¹⁶

This reminds us that the Levitical sacrifices had no power in and of themselves to atone for sin, but depended on the merits of Christ's atonement which was still to be accomplished.

4. The Gospel according to Leviticus

Allis wrote concerning Leviticus:

This is the New Testament gospel for sinners stated in Old Testament terms and enshrined in the ritual of sacrifice; and it finds its fullest expression in the ritual of the day of atonement.¹⁷

VII. THE MESSAGE OF LEVITICUS

Original message:

Present message:

¹⁵ Ibid., 161.

¹⁶ G Crossley, *The Old Testament Explained and Applied* (England: Evangelical Press, 2002), 117.

¹⁷ O.T. Allis, "Leviticus," in *New Bible Commentary* ed. F. Davidson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 135.