

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Leviticus

Leviticus enabled ancient Israel to live in relationship with a holy God. But now that Christ has come as our High Priest and ultimate sacrifice—thereby fulfilling many of the requirements outlined in Leviticus—what do laws governing ancient Israel’s system of worship, with its priests and animal sacrifices, have to do with us? Leviticus increases our understanding of God’s holiness. And God’s demand for those who know him remains the same: “I am the Lord your God. . . . You must be holy because I am holy” ([Lev 11:44–45](#); [1 Pet 1:15–16](#)).

Setting

Leviticus continues the account of redemption that began with the promises made to Abraham ([Gen 12, 15, 17](#)) and the liberation of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt ([Exod 1-15](#)). The setting of Leviticus is the foot of Mount Sinai. The Israelites had not yet wandered in the wilderness or entered the Promised Land of Canaan. God had already established his covenant with Israel, declaring the Israelites to be his special treasure, royal priesthood, and chosen people ([Exod 19:5-6](#)). The people of Israel had received the Ten Commandments ([Exod 20:1-17](#)), the plans for the Tabernacle ([Exod 25-27; 30:1-38](#)), and the institution of the priesthood ([Exod 28-29](#)). The Tabernacle had been completed and dedicated ([Exod 35-40](#)). Now, in Leviticus, God spoke to Moses about his own holy nature, providing instructions about worship and conduct appropriate for Israel as his covenant people.

Summary

The regulations in Leviticus deal primarily with the activities and responsibilities of the priestly tribe of Levi, especially the high priest (see [Exod 28](#); [Num 3:44–4:49](#)). It includes God's instructions about the Tabernacle, the priesthood, sacrifices, holy days, and ceremonial purity. Three main concerns are evident throughout Leviticus: the holiness of God, what is appropriate in worshiping a holy God, and how Israel was to be holy in relation to God.

A proper relationship with God begins with knowing who God is and understanding his nature. Yet, finite human minds cannot fully comprehend God, the Eternal One. Worse, if left to our own intuition, we inevitably begin to worship idols rather than the true God. In Leviticus, God graciously reveals his holiness in tangible ways and instructs his people how to worship him acceptably. Each sacrifice and holy day teaches the Israelites about God and what he requires of them.

God calls Israel to know him and to love him (see [Deut 6:5](#); [11:1](#)). As a result, they will also love and serve one another ([19:18](#), [33–34](#)). The rituals and regulations revealed in Leviticus teach the Israelites how to integrate love and service into their lives, both as individuals and as a nation.

Authorship

Some scholars believe that Leviticus was written during Israel's exile in Babylon (about 586–539 BC), long after the time of Moses. This view, however, does not explain why Judaism during the Exile, which was increasingly oriented around the rabbi and the synagogue, would be concerned with the priesthood and the Tabernacle. Nor does it account for Israelite worship prior to the Exile, aside from the liturgy contained or implied in the Psalms.

It is likely that Moses wrote Leviticus during Israel's time in the wilderness after the Exodus. Both Jewish tradition and the early Christian church identified Moses as the author of Leviticus. Moses, raised in the court of Egypt's king, would have been skilled in reading, writing, and mathematics (see [Acts 7:20–22](#)) and quite capable of writing Leviticus. The book begins and ends with statements affirming that the contents of Leviticus were given to Israel by God through Moses ([1:1–2](#); [27:34](#)). Leviticus repeatedly describes how Moses received the Lord's instructions (e.g., [4:1](#); [5:14](#); [6:1](#), [8](#), [19](#), [24](#); [7:22](#), [28](#); [8:1](#)) and carried them out ([8:4–10:20](#)). The Old Testament often refers to Moses as the author of the Pentateuch (Genesis—Deuteronomy; see [Josh 8:31–32](#); [23:6](#); [1 Kgs 2:3](#); [2 Kgs 14:6](#); [23:25](#); [2 Chr 23:18](#); [30:16](#); [Ezra 3:2](#); [7:6](#); [Neh 8:1](#); [Dan 9:11–13](#)). The New Testament does the same ([Matt 19:7–8](#); [Luke 2:22](#); [24:44](#); [John 7:19](#), [23](#); [Rom 10:5](#); [1 Cor 9:9](#); [Heb 10:28](#)). See also Genesis Book Introduction, "Authorship."

Meaning and Message

Although it is set in an ancient time and culture, Leviticus communicates a timeless and vibrant message: God is holy, and he expects his people, whom he has rescued, to be holy like he is. God's holiness and his gracious redemption provide both the foundation and the motivation for his people's own holiness ([11:44-45](#)).

The priests stood between God and the people as mediators of the covenant. The priests interpreted what was holy and how holiness should be expressed in the community. The atoning sacrifices provided the way for the people to have their sins forgiven and to be made right with God (atonement). The non-atoning sacrifices celebrated the people's relationship with God through gifts and shared meals. While surrounding nations offered sacrifices to their gods to appease them and gain their favor, Israel's worship was not designed to manipulate God. Rather, the worship prepared and purified the people so that they could approach God. Each of the laws, ceremonies, and holy days teaches that God is holy and that he expects his people to be holy ([Lev 11:44-45](#); [19:2](#); see [1 Cor 3:17](#); [1 Pet 1:15](#)).

Forgiveness of sin and reconciliation to God directly relate to how people treat one another. Concern for social justice pervades Leviticus, which sets forth obligations to one's neighbor, to the poor, and to foreigners. God expects those in covenant with him to love each other as an expression of his love (cp. [Matt 22:39](#); [Mark 12:31](#); [Luke 10:27](#); [Rom 13:9](#); [Gal 5:14](#); [Jas 2:8](#)).