

Leviticus

ORIENTING DATA FOR LEVITICUS

- Content: various laws having to do with holiness before God and with love of neighbor, including sacrifices, ritual cleanness, and social obligations, as well as laws for the Levites regarding their priestly duties.
- Emphases: getting it right with regard to worship, for both people and priests; institution of the priesthood under Aaron; laws protecting ritual cleanness, including atonement for sins (the Day of Atonement); laws regulating sexual relations, family life, punishments for major crimes, festivals, and special years (sabbaths and jubilees)

OVERVIEW OF LEVITICUS

The title of this book (by way of Latin from the Greek *levitikon*) means “pertaining to the Levites,” which not only aptly describes its basic contents but also gives a clue as to why it is so often unappealing to contemporary readers—not to mention that it has so little narrative (chs. 8–10; 24:10–23 are the exceptions). But with a little help, you can come to a basic understanding of both its contents and its place in the narrative of the Pentateuch—even if the nature of, and reason for, some of the laws themselves may escape you (for this you may wish to consult a good commentary; e.g., Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* [see *How to 1*, p. 268]).

It is important to note that Leviticus picks up precisely where Exodus left off—with the Lord speaking to Moses “from the Tent of Meeting” and saying, “Speak to the Israelites and say ...” From that point on, the movement from one section to another is signaled by the phrase, “The LORD said to Moses” (4:1; 5:14; 6:1, 8; and so forth). It will be no surprise, then, to discover that the first main part of the book (chs. 1–16, commonly known as the Levitical Code) has primarily to do with regulations for the people and the priests related directly to the tabernacle, which appeared toward the end of Exodus (chs. 25–31; 35–40).

This code outlines easily. It begins with offerings by the people (1:1–6:7), followed by instructions for the priests (6:8–7:38). These are followed (logically) by the institution of the Aaronic priesthood (chs. 8–9) and the judgment on two of Aaron’s sons who thought they could do it their own way (10:1–7), with further instructions for the priests (10:8–20). The next section (chs. 11–15) then begins with a new rubric, “The LORD said to Moses *and Aaron*” (11:1, emphasis added; see also 13:1; 14:33; 15:1, but nowhere else in Leviticus). Here you find laws that deal especially with ritual cleanness (purity)—with a view to avoiding what happened to Aaron’s two sons. Here also appears for the first time the very important injunction, “Be holy, because I am holy” (11:44, 45). This is followed, appropriately, by the institution of the Day of Atonement (ch. 16).

What follows (chs. 17–25) is commonly known as the Holiness Code, which is governed by the repeated charge to “be holy, because I am holy” (beginning in 19:2 and throughout). But now a significant part of being holy is to “love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18). Thus the section is a collection of various laws dealing with one’s relationship both to God and to others. At the end are requirements for the sabbath and jubilee years (ch. 25), while the book concludes with covenant blessings and curses (ch. 26) that provide a formal conclusion to the covenant structure that began in Exodus 20. The book itself concludes with an appendix on vows and tithes (Lev 27).

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING LEVITICUS

In order to get the most out of your reading, you need to remind yourself of two things: (1) These laws are part of God’s covenant with Israel, and therefore they are not just religious rites but have to do with *relationships*, and (2) Leviticus is *part of the larger narrative* of the Pentateuch and must be understood in light of what has preceded and what follows.

To pick up the second point first: Just as the legal portions of Exodus make good sense when you see their place in the larger narrative, so you need to see Leviticus as a longer expression of the same before the narrative resumes in Numbers. Crucial here is the fact that Israel is still camped at the foot of Sinai—a wilderness area—where they will spend a full year being molded into a people before God will lead them toward the conquest of Canaan. Here they will need double protection—from diseases of various kinds and from one another! Therefore, in order for these individuals who grew up in slavery to be formed into God’s people, there is great need for them to get two sets of relationships in order, namely, with God and with one another. Note, then, that Leviticus continues with the same ordering of things found in the Ten Commandments (first vertical, then horizontal).

The covenantal aspect of these various laws is their most important feature. Recall the parts of the covenant noted in our Exodus chapter (p. 37). God has sovereignly delivered these people from slavery and has brought them to Sinai; here he has promised to make them his own “treasured possession” out of all the nations on earth (Exod 19:5), who will also therefore be for him “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (v. 6). That is, their role as a “kingdom” is to serve as God’s priests for the world, and to do so they must bear his likeness (“be holy, because I am holy”). Thus, God covenants with them on his part to bless them (Lev 26:1–13); what he requires on their part is that, even though they are his treasured possession, they maintain a holy awe and obedience toward him. So note in this regard how often, especially in chapters 18–26, the requirement is punctuated with the words, “I am the LORD [Yahweh]” or “I am the LORD your God.”

Thus the first set of laws in Leviticus has to do with their “getting it right” when they come to God with various sacrifices. You will note that they are not told what the sacrifices mean (which they already knew), but how to do them properly—although we can infer some things about their meaning from these descriptions. The covenantal nature of these sacrifices appears in three ways: First, the sacrifice constitutes a *gift* on the part of the worshipers to their covenant Lord; second, some of the sacrifices imply *fellowship* on the part of the worshiper with God; third, sacrifice sometimes functions as a way of healing a break in the relationship—a form of *atonement*.

So also with the laws of purity. Here the concern again is that the people have a proper sense of what it means for God to be present among them (see 15:31). At issue here is who may be in the camp, where God himself dwells at the center, and who must remain outside (because they are unclean). Included is the separating out of certain animals and insects that are clean or unclean. At the heart of all of this is the fact that “God is holy” and therefore his people also must be holy.

But holiness does not deal simply with rites and being clean. God’s holiness is especially seen in his loving compassion that made the Israelites his people. Therefore, the laws—particularly in the Holiness Code—demand that God’s people bear God’s likeness in this regard. Since the Israelites are thrown together (in a very orderly way, of course!) in this very tight camp where God dwells in the midst of them, they must display his character in their dealings with one another. Thus, even though this code also contains further “relationship with God” laws, it is especially concerned with how people in community treat one another. And it includes treating them justly and mercifully, which is why the collection ends with the sabbath and jubilee years, so that the land also may “rest,” and a time to “proclaim liberty to all” may occur on the sabbath of the sabbath years (25:10).

If you look for these covenantal moments as you read these laws, you may find it to be a far more interesting experience than you might have expected.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 43–46.