

In Hebrew, "Leviticus" means "And He called." Lev is regarded as "the liturgical handbook for the Levitical priesthood, and also serves to teach Israelites of the necessity of untainted holiness in every aspect of their lives. Its content, therefore, consists of categories of laws and rubrics.

Authorship is not attributed to any one person, though the origin of most of the content and the spirit of Lev is found in Moses. Lev was set in finished form within a well-structured, established society in which the Temple was the center of public worship. Lev can therefore be viewed as "the work of many hands engaged through the centuries in adapting Mosaic statutes to the needs of a later time." [As a modern parallel, consider the revisions to Christian worship, worship materials and worship styles in the past century or so.]

Lev is not compiled from different sources as was the Book of Genesis; it is firmly grounded in just one of those sources: the "Priestly tradition." However, Lev also includes some early primitive features, which can be seen as "earlier codified standards, or laws, preserved by the priests in earlier centuries and in local sanctuaries apart from the Temple." This could include early traditions preserved through oral tradition during the Exile.

Lev began to take form with editing of the "Holiness Code (Chs 17-26) after the end of the Exile (538 BC). To this was added the sacrificial code (Chs 1-7); the ordination rite (Chs 8-10); the legal purity code (Chs 11-16); and Ch 27, which deals with the commutation of vows (and was a later addition).

The purpose of Lev was to regulate all aspects of post-exilic religious observance by the community, especially as these related to the Temple liturgy (which is understood to include sacrifices as the central liturgical component).

Lev is not, in fact, a separate book in its original devising, but a work which spans later chapters of the Book of Exodus (Chs 25-40) and also the first portion of the Book of Numbers. This is revealed structurally in, for example, the sequencing of presentation:

Exodus 25-40: Construction and furnishing of the Lord's dwelling (the Temple).

Leviticus 1.1-7.38: Sacrifice (an interruption of the topic between construction and "manning" (the priests) made necessary by the primary importance of sacrifice in the whole program).

Leviticus 8-10: Ordination and the priesthood.

Material for the First Session

Part 1: The Law of Sacrifice, 1.1-7.38:

- **Types of Sacrifice**
- **The Priest and Sacrifice**

Part 2: The Ceremony of Ordination: 8.1-10.20

Ch 1: Holocaust, or “Whole Burnt” Offerings

The setting is presented as Moses, in the wilderness, with the “traveling Tabernacle” as the *de facto* “Temple” of Israel. The layout, dimensions, and functional divisions of the Tabernacle, later reflected in the design of the permanent Temple in Jerusalem, were prominent in the minds of faithful Israelites.

While Holocaust offerings were entirely consumed, leaving nothing for any humans’ use, the foremost concept was that a Holocaust offering “ascends” or “rises” to Yahweh God and so reaches, honors, and pleases Him.

Ch 2: Cereal, or “Grain” Offerings

These offerings took several forms, including raw fine-milled flour mixed with olive oil and incense, to be burned (remember the concept of “ascending” offerings), and baked offerings. A portion of baked offerings was also burned, but baked offerings were also to be consumed by the priests as part of their sustenance.

Leaven was not permitted because it produced fermentation (hence, decay) and was also associated with pagan Canaanite beliefs in which fermentation was connected with fertility and the cult thereof.

Presentation of Cereal Offerings were also understood as a form of “tribute” to the Sovereign of the Land, Yahweh God.

Ch 3: Peace Offerings

Within the concept of “Peace Offerings” is the sense of something “slain” or “slaughtered” (thus, a “sacrificial victim”). Unlike a Holocaust Offering, the victim in a Peace Offering is not entirely destroyed; part is burned, and part is eaten.

The term “Peace Offering,” derived from the Greek-language Hebrew Scriptures, falls short of the original Hebrew-language concepts which include shades of meaning involving “fulfillment offering” and “sign of completeness.”

The term “Peace Offering” does, however, preserve the idea of harmony between Yahweh God and His people, as a means to preserve and celebrate this. Actual consumption of the sacred food was essential, and could only be accomplished by those who were ritually pure, that is, “not unclean.”

Therefore, the “eating” portion of the Peace Offering cannot be understood in the same way as the Christian Eucharist, which is regarded as a Sacramental Meal imparting forgiveness of sins to the eater.

Ch 4: Sin Offerings

A “Sin Offering” was regarded as an expiation, or “satisfaction,” for sin—the paying of a debt. Such an offering could be made for the High Priest (4.1-12), the entire community (.13-21), the national ruler

(.22-27), or for private individuals (4.27-5.13). [See Num 15.22-31 for parallel laws and certain variations, in a briefer form.]

Sin Offerings were concerned specifically with “accidental” or “mistaken” sins (for which, despite the accidental nature, the offender was still fully culpable).

Ch 5: Guilt Offerings

The first six verses of Ch 5 provide some specific “cases” for which “Sin Offerings” must apply. This is followed by verses .7-.13, which make concessions to the economic situation of an offender with consideration for poor persons.

There is some “blurring” between Sin Offerings and Guilt Offerings, particularly since the legislated penalties (sacrifices) are identical. The Levitical ritual also seems to use the terms interchangeably.

The chief distinction, however, involves non-accidental, or willful/deliberate actions or omissions of action. This distinction was not always made and, indeed, seems to have been problematic for priestly differentiation of the origins of a sin.

Since the recipe for expiation was the same, in practical terms it made no difference, and because the prescribed sacrifice was regarded as satisfying the sin-debt in full, there was no significance to making the fine moral distinction.

[Contrast this viewpoint with Christian perspectives on sin, particularly presumptive, or deliberate, sins and continuing patterns of sin in the lives of Christians.]

Ch 6.1-7.38: Priest and Sacrifice

Specific “rights and duties” of priests in relation to the five categories of sacrifices are provided, notably, not in the same order as presented in the enumeration of Types of Sacrifice. The instructions are detailed and specific.

Chs 8.1-10.20: The Ceremony of Ordination

Though presented in the context of Aaron and his sons, the ceremonial directives reflect established tradition (cf. Ex 28.1-29.35; 39.1-31; 40.12-15). Linking post-Exilic ordination ceremony with the ancient tradition of Moses demonstrated continuity and affirmed the re-establishment of a faithful Covenant People.

The duration (an ‘Octave’, eight days; 9.1-24) emphasized both the significance, and the longevity, of the priestly office.

Recounting “the sin of Aaron’s sons” (10.1-20) served to emphasize the importance of absolute adherence to ritual legislation, and adds an additional body of laws for the priests (10.8-15).

The key to Moses’ anger, when apparently the rubrics had been followed, is found in 6.23, a detail which had been omitted in the case at issue. This provides a final flourish in the emphasis on strict adherence.

Leviticus Study Part Two: October 2018

Third Major Division (11.1-15.33): How states of uncleanness arise, and how to regain purity (*these laws reflect post-exilic editing but also reveal archaic roots*).

To be “unclean” was viewed not as a moral condition but an existential one: the state in which one cannot have any contact with YHWH God. It was, therefore, possible to alter the state of uncleanness procedurally in order to re-establish contact with YHWH.

- 11.1-47, clean and unclean animals
- 12.1-8, childbirth
- 13.1-14.57, leprosy
- 15.1-33, sexual uncleanness

11.1-8: large land animals (*note, some pagan associations informed restrictions herein*)

11.7-12: sea creatures (scales only are allowed!)

11.13-23: flying creatures

11.29-38: small creatures

11.39-40: “dead edibles”

11.41-43: reptiles

11.44-47: Authority for all these statutes: the God of Israel

Childbirth 12.1-8: *Note: numerous ancient peoples associated childbirth with uncleanness (due to loss of blood); such uncleanness was widely considered contagious [but consider the practical benefits of separating new child-bearers from public places and crowds, in a time long before awareness of microorganisms].*

A woman’s vitality was diminished by childbirth, thus she was objectively separated from YHWH, the Source of Life, until her vitality was restored. Male children were considered the greater blessing (due to the strength/“vitality” of the male), hence shorter duration of unclean status for bearers of males. (NT Ref: Lk 22-24, re new mother Mary of Nazareth.)

Leprosy 13.1-14.57: Not the modern disease of “Leprosy” but any discernible “active” skin condition/disease. It was the lack of bodily integrity necessary for the worship of YHWH that resulted in religious and social ostracization.

Not only people, but also clothing and houses could be defined as “leprous” (mold and mildew!). It was the presence of the corrupting force which made protective laws necessary.

Priests, using the instructions in Lev, determined active or inactive status of a leprous condition. A leprous person was required to exhibit his/her condition in a visible, public manner (13.45-46).

For humans: Lev 13.1-46: only *active* skin diseases (discolored, oozing, flaking, cracking, etc.) were seen as indicators of a leprous condition. Whiteness (13.13, 16-17, 38-39) was taken as a sign of healing/cleanness.

Purification: Lev 14.1-32 provides two ceremonies:

14.2-9: archaic rite involving various actions connected with liberation from evil spirits; vv 10ff provided sacrificial rites.

Note the not-infrequent time frame of seven days, followed by a sacrifice “on the eighth day” (14.10).

Note also that once again (14.21) an exception to the prescribed sacrifice is provided for the poor. *However*, a sacrifice is still required—the poor are not exempted.

Leprosy in buildings: 14.33-57. *Note, in 14.34, the phrase “if I”*. This reflects the ancient Hebrew attitude which attributed everything which happens ultimately to God.

Regarding structures, the priest again was the authority. Remediation could include repair or overhaul; if this failed, the structure was demolished.

Sexual uncleanness 15.1-33: As with childbirth, “discharges” were linked to the “loss of vitality” idea. In 15.2-7, the “discharge” was likely related to gonorrhea. Standards for such were more serious than for a discharge of semen.

15.18: Sexual relations always rendered both partners unclean. This was not “moral” uncleanness, but “cultic” (related to the standards for worshiping and relating to YHWH). *Note* that the time span for uncleanness related to sexual activity was brief.

Fourth Major Division: The Day of Atonement, 16.1-34: Verses 1-28 preserve an ancient ritual (16.8-10: “Azazel” was most likely an “ancient desert demon” figure; the root of the name is “rough, rocky place.”

Vv. 29-34: Statement of the solemn requirement: the Day of Atonement is to be an annual observance.

Questions:

What consistent patterns in outlook begin to emerge concerning the Laws and responses to breaches?

Can you discern, or extrapolate, any practical benefits from the observance of some of the laws concerning what is clean and what is unclean, and the responses and purification requirements regarding them?

Next month: Lev 17.1-26.46, “The Law of Holiness” also known as “The Holiness Code:” the earliest part of the Book of Leviticus, summed up in the concept: “Israel must be holy as God is holy.”

Note, if you wish, the “Deuteronomic Code” (Dt Chs 12-26) for comparison purposes.