

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

Leviticus

The Bible's third book, between Exodus and Numbers, outlines the work of the Hebrew priests and a way of holiness for the nation of Israel. Named for the Levites (from the tribe of Levi, one of Jacob's 12 sons) who served as priests and caretakers of the tabernacle and temple, Leviticus is among the more difficult Bible content for modern readers.

The time and place of the book are both one: It all took place during the year that Israel camped before Mt. Sinai — about 1400 B.C. No movement in location or change of time is recorded in its 27 chapters.

After the old covenant had been given (Ex. 20-24) and the Levitical tabernacle of meeting prescribed and constructed (Ex. 25-31, 35-40), God instructed Moses in liturgy — the sacrifices and rituals to be performed in the tabernacle and later in the Jerusalem temple. *The Lord spoke to Moses [and Aaron], saying . . .* occurs nearly 40 times, introducing most chapters. The teaching includes . . .

- different offerings (7:37, 38) for different purposes: burnt (1:3-17; 6:8-13); grain (2:1-16; 6:14-23); peace (3:1-17; 7:11-21); sin (4:1-35; 6:24-30); trespass (5:1-6:7; 7:1-10). Here is the sacrificial system of the old covenant, providing the Hebrew nation with a means to approach their holy, merciful God. The principle of blood sacrifice was that of atonement by substituting an innocent life for a guilty one. The system also offered opportunity to express personal thanks, dedication, generosity, and restitution.
- anointing the tabernacle; consecration and service of its priests (chs. 8-10)
- distinction of animals that may be eaten from those that may not be (ch. 11; 20:25)

- procedures for dealing with some types of uncleanness and disease (chs. 12-15)
- ritual for the Day of Atonement — holiest day of the Hebrew year (ch. 16)
- summary and explanation of the feasts, holy days, Sabbatical years, and jubilees of the Hebrew calendar, dominated by the # 7 (chs. 23, 25)

Three historical incidents are reported from Israel's ten months at the mountain:

1. the inauguration of tabernacle service, with the appearance of God's glory and fire (ch. 9, esp. vv. 23, 24)
2. the untimely deaths of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons who offered strange fire before the Lord (10:1, 2ff.)
3. the arrest and stoning of a man who blasphemed the Lord's name (24:10-23)

Leviticus in a sentence: At Mt. Sinai, the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron concerning the service of the priests in the tabernacle and the conduct of the people at all times. "Be holy, for I the LORD am holy."

The key word in Leviticus is *holy*, which means "sanctified" (over 100 times). The key thought is "You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy" (11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7, 26). Holiness for ancient Israel involved both sacrifice *for* sin and separation *from* sin. Chapters 17-27 are mostly a list of laws called the "holiness code." They include . . .

- abstaining from fat and blood (17:1-16; 3:17; 7:22-27)
- maintaining sexual purity, the seventh commandment (18:1-23; 20:10-22). This section stresses that the heathen tribes will be driven from Canaan because they have defiled themselves with extreme sexual perversion and abomination, including homosexuality and bestiality (18:22-30; 20:22-26).
- other commandments of the Decalogue are repeated in Leviticus 19: don't make graven images (v. 4); don't blaspheme God's name (v. 12); keep the Sabbath (vv. 3, 30); honor parents (v. 3); don't murder (vv. 17, 18); don't steal (vv. 11, 13, 35, 36); don't lie (v. 11). The first commandment is repeated about every other verse (16 times) with the words *I am the Lord your God*; the tenth, "You shall not covet," is implied (v. 17a).
- the great "love one another" command of Jesus Christ, first found here (19:18)
- haircuts, body-piercing, tattoos, harlots, and witchcraft (19:27-31)
- child sacrifice: abortion (18:21; 20:1-5)
- holiness for the priesthood (chs. 21, 22)
- a time and a place: "Keep my Sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary" (19:30; 26:2)
- rewards for obedience, seven-fold chastening for disobedience, and the covenant promise for repentance (ch. 26)
- regulations of vows, values, and tithes (ch. 27)