

LEVITICUS

Introduction

Leviticus is the third book of the Torah (first five books of the Old Testament), and it was the first book studied by a Jewish child; yet is often among the last books of the Bible to be studied by a modern-day Christian. However, a book with about 40 New Testament references should be of great significance to every Christian. Apart from the question of the typological (see definition below) significance of Levitical sacrifices, the Book of Leviticus contains extensive revelation concerning the character of God – especially His holiness but also His electing love and grace. It also provides many rich lessons concerning the holy life that God expects of His people. Many New Testament passages, including some key concepts in the Epistle to the Hebrews, cannot be evaluated (or read) properly without a clear understanding of their counterparts in the Book of Leviticus.

- *Typological: Differing from a symbol or allegory, a typology is a representation of an actual, historical reference. According to Christian interpretation, biblical typology deals with the parallels between actual, historical Old Testament figures or events with the New Testament.*

The Titles of the Book

The title “Leviticus” comes from the Greek *Leuitikon*, an adjective used by the translators of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) as the title of the book because it pertains to priestly ceremonies and institutions. The Hebrew title is simply *wayyiqra’*, “and He called” (the first word in 1:1).

Authorship and Date

Though the author is not specifically identified in the book, Moses should be accepted as its author for several key reasons:

1. The content of the book was revealed to Moses at Sinai (7:37-38; 26:46; 27:34) and mostly to or through Moses (1:1; 4:1; 6:1, 8, 19, 24; 7:22; 8:1; etc.), so he is most likely the one who would record these divine revelations.
2. The book is the sequel to Exodus which specifically claims Moses as its author (Exodus 17:14; 24:4, 7; 34:27-28).
3. Jesus affirmed Moses as author (Matthew 8:4; Mark 1:44; cf. Leviticus 14:2-32). Thus, most scholars conclude that Leviticus was written by Moses shortly after the composition of Exodus in the second half of the 15th century B.C.

Liberal scholarship does deny Mosaic authorship, and resources below are listed for further study in this area.

Historical and Theological Setting

The historical and theological context of the Book of Leviticus is implied in the opening and closing verses of the book (1:1; 27:34; cf. 7:37-38). Historically Leviticus was the sequel to Exodus, for the Levitical sacrificial system was a divine revelation to Israel given through Moses as a part of the covenant obligation at Sinai. Thus, the legislation contained in Leviticus follows the historical narrative concerning the construction of the tabernacle (Exodus 25-40) and precedes the next major historical narrative of the numbering of the Israelite tribes for the decampment from Sinai (Numbers 1-4). Theologically the Levitical sacrificial system was instituted for a people redeemed from Egypt and in covenant relationship with their God. Thus, sacrifice in Israel was not a human effort to obtain favor with a hostile God but a response to the Lord who had first given Himself to Israel in covenant relationship. Yet whenever sin or impurity, whether ethical or ceremonial, disrupted this fellowship, the individual or the nation renewed covenant fellowship with the Lord through sacrifice, the particular sacrifice depending on the exact circumstance of the disruption.

Literary Genre

The Book of Leviticus deals with the worship of Israel – its sacrifices, priesthood, laws rendering a person unclean and so disqualifying him for worship, and various special times and seasons of worship. It also contains many regulations pertaining to daily living and practical holiness. Thus, the literary form of Leviticus is legal literature.

Theme & Structure

Theme

The theme of Leviticus is the Israelite believer's worship and walk before the holy God. By way of application, this theme is significant for Christians today (cf. 1 Peter 1:15-16). Of course, the theme verse of Leviticus is 19:2: "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." Leviticus is the book of holiness (*qādôš*, "separateness"). While much stress is placed on ceremonial holiness, wherein persons, animals, or objects are set apart from profane (irreverent) use for the service of God, it is ultimately symbolic of the holiness for God Himself who is separate from all sin.

Structure

1:1—17:16, The Laws of Acceptable Approach to God: Sacrifice
+in the Offerings
+ by the Priests
+ regarding the People
+ and the National Atonement

18:1—27:34, The Laws of Acceptable Walk with God: Sanctification
+ of the People
+ of the Priesthood
+ in Worship
+ in the Land
+ through Vows

The Levites

The Levites are all those who belong to the tribe of Levi, one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Because God spared the firstborn of Israel in the last plague that came over Egypt (Exodus 11:4-12:13), all firstborn sons and firstborn animals belonged to God. The animals were sacrificed while the men were redeemed. To be redeemed, the family paid a price to the priest instead of giving their firstborn over to the service of the temple. God appointed the Levites to take the place of the firstborn to serve God. One clan or family of the Leviticus, the family of Aaron, was set apart to be priests. The rest of the Levites were to be assistants to the priests. Their duties were the care of the tabernacle (and later the care of the temple) and to be teachers, scribes, musicians, officers, and judges (1 Chronicles 23). The tribe of Levi was the only tribe that did not get its own land after the Israelite conquered Canaan; instead, they received 48 cities scattered throughout the country (Numbers 35:7; Joshua 21:19). Since they did not receive land, they could not support themselves; they were supported by the tithes of the rest of Israel (similar to our current ministry today). The book of Leviticus contains the bulk of the system of laws under which the Hebrew nation lived (as stated previously), laws administered by the Levitical priesthood.

This resource was created using the following references which are recommended for further study of Leviticus:

The Bible Knowledge Commentary by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck
Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms by Stanley J. Grenz (Guretzki, Nordling)
Halley's Bible Handbook by Dr. Henry H. Halley
New Dictionary of Theology by Brian S. Rosner
Bell Gardens Baptist Church (website)