



Leviticus

The book of Leviticus is a collection of laws most of which are focused around the question of how best to worship God. Right at the heart of Leviticus lies the principle of holiness. God is holy and so holiness describes the deep character of God. Leviticus describes both how God can be worshipped and how his people can themselves be holy, as a reflection of who God is in the world.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 2 hours
Short of time? Just read 1.1-17; 11.1-47;
 16.1-34; 26.1-46

Though in all honesty, this is the kind of book that, hard though it is, you have to read all of if you want to understand the mindset that lies behind it.



Genre

Law



Inspiring quotes

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord. (*Leviticus 19.18*)

³³ When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴ The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (*Leviticus 19.33-34*)

You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine. (*Leviticus 20.26*)



Anything tricky?

Well yes...the whole book of Leviticus. It is notoriously difficult to read and make sense of. Some tips that might help you make more sense of it:

- Leviticus is written into a particular context – the worship of God in the temple of Israel – the laws are designed to help people know how to worship God, both in the temple and in their daily lives. Try to look behind the laws for what they tell you about God and about worship.
- A major theme in Leviticus is 'purity' and 'impurity'. You should not confuse these with 'good' and 'sinful'. The idea that lies behind the terms is that God is holy and pure but human beings, simply by living, would become unclean and so would be unable to come close to the holiness of God. Much of Leviticus lays down laws that explain what made people unclean and how to become clean once more so they could worship the God of holiness.
- It is also fascinating to see what all the different sacrifices were for. It is easy to assume that sacrifices were just to wipe out sin – they were not! They were for lots of different things.

The worship of Christianity is very different from the worship of Leviticus, but it is hard to understand the New Testament without having some grasp of sacrifice, purity and temple worship?



About the Author

Traditionally Moses was regarded as the author of the first five books of the Bible (Genesis–Deuteronomy); known in Judaism as the Torah and in Christianity often as the Pentateuch (or five teachings).

Today many scholars would argue that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch but that these five books grew up over a long period of time and were written down and edited from oral tradition.

The focus of Leviticus is on the temple and on matters that particularly concern the Priests and Levites in the temple. Many think that their influence may lie behind this collection of laws.



What kind of Book is it?

Law – particularly what is called priestly law, in other words the laws that govern how the worship of God should take place.

Chapters 17–26 form what is often called the Holiness Code, a particular collection of laws that give guidance on how to be holy.



Look out for...

Sacrifices – every time you see commands about a sacrifice, notice what it was for and how it was done. That way you will build up a bigger picture of how sacrifice was seen in the temple.

Notice how the word holy or holiness is used. What do you think it meant?

Also look out for pure/impure; purity/impurity; clean/unclean. As you read notice what was declared to be in each category and see if you can work out why certain things were declared to be one or the other.



About the times

Many scholars think that Leviticus reached its final form around the sixth century bc, though it contains material that dates back much earlier than that.

Other books set around this time

At least in part, Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, which are all set around the time of the giving of the law.



How is it structured?

- 1.1 Setting the scene – God speaks to Moses
- 1.2–7.38 Laws about sacrifices
- 8.1–10.20 The institution of the priesthood
- 11.1–15.33 Laws about purity and impurity
- 16.1-24 The Day of Atonement
- 17.1–27.34 The Holiness Code – guidelines for holy living



What could this mean for me?

The book of Leviticus explains in great detail how Jews could worship God in the temple. Look beneath the alien practices, language and laws and ask what, if anything, we might learn about worship from how they practised?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Do you feel any differently about Leviticus than you did when you began reading? Do you like it more or less now?
- If modern churches were to write a book like Leviticus – what would they put in it? (Laws about music? Coffee? Chairs? Service books/screens?)
- Discuss holiness. What do you think holiness is today? Are there any overlaps between our view of holiness and that of Leviticus?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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