Fall 2024 – Adult Sunday School

Three Rivers Presbyterian Church

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**Lesson 13 – Leviticus**

(All Scripture English Standard version unless otherwise noted; *italics*, underlining, color & ‘greyscale’ mine)

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Survey of the Old Testament

ot501-13

<https://www.biblicaltraining.org/learn/institute/ot501-survey-of-the-old-testament/ot501-13-leviticus>

**I. Introduction** (00:13):

We are now moving into our lecture on the book of Leviticus, the third book in the Pentateuch. It's Hebrew name is vayikra, which just means the simply, "And he," that is, Yahweh, "called or proclaimed." Again, it's the first word in the book. We call it Leviticus in English because it deals with the stuff pertaining to the Levites. This book is going to be a lot about *worship, sacrifices*, and *Levitical service*, so that's why we call it *Leviticus*. But in Hebrew it just means, "And he called." Notice that in Hebrew, it begins with word "and," and it's connecting it back to the previous two books. Genesis and Exodus and Leviticus, we've got *one united narrative sequence* that really is going to go all the way from Genesis to 2 Kings. That's the big history section that we're in right now.

There's *no narrative progression* in the book of Leviticus. We've come to a halt. Israel is now camped at Sinai for about one year, and this single year began in Exodus 19. So, they came out of Egypt, wandered in the wilderness, camped at Sinai, had the Massah-Meribah event, and appointed 70 elders. Now Moses is up on the mountain and they're going to be there for a year, getting the covenant started. So, from Exodus 19 all the way to Numbers 10, Israel's camped at the base of Sinai.

Now, if you think about that, that's a pretty amazing number. It's called *narrative focus*, in terms of *time stamping*. Think of how much time the book of Genesis covers, from the creation all the way down to when Israel went into Egypt, the 70 members of Jacob's family were there. Then you've got covered in Exodus, some 80 years. You've got Moses' first 40 years in Egypt and his second 40 years wandering in the wilderness. We've got a one-year halt, so this is an important year. Yahweh on Sinai *arranging, organizing, administering* His kingdom in this theocratic moment.

The purpose of Leviticus is *to promote the holiness of God's people*. So, when you think about Leviticus, think about it as being the book of *holiness*, okay? The ***priests*** mediate the presence of God, and the ***sacrificial system*** does two things. It atones for our covered sin, and it provides the means of fellowship or communion with God. This system has both *positive* and *negative* aspects to it, right? You've got to sacrifice for sin, confess your sin, get your sins forgiven, but then you have fellowship with God subsequent to that. Okay?

The book of Exodus laid the foundation for the biblical theme of *divine presence*, that we saw. The book of Leviticus provides the system that allows or permits a holy God to dwell in the midst of an unholy or unclean people. How can we purify and sanctify the people so that when God gets into their midst, He doesn't consume them?

**II. Outline & Contents** (03:15):

In terms of *genre*, we have *law* or *legislation* being the largest part of the book of Leviticus. There's just some limited *historical narrative*. So, we've got probably the least amount of narrative in Leviticus compared to that of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy. It's mostly about Levitical instruction. In terms of *outline* and *contents*, we can see that there is perhaps a *chiastic* structure here, A, B, C, D, sin or day of atonement. Then coming back out, C, B, A. This is suggested by Michael Morales, who has a book called *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?* *A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*. It's what I would consider the best biblical-theological treatment of the book of Leviticus currently out there. It's excellent. You should get that.

Leviticus begins with describing some sacrifices, like guilt offerings and sin offerings. We talk about the institution of the priesthood, the clean, unclean in daily life, and the day of atonement. Coming back out, holy and profane things in daily life, legislation for the priesthood, mirroring the institution for the priesthood, festivals, and sacred time, and then sacrifices that relate to them.

So, you can see that there's an *intentional literary design* behind this. Some people would think, "*Oh, this has all been messed up and redacted. Why don't we just put the institution of priesthood and the legislation of priesthood together*?" That would be what we would think about doing in our brains. "*And let's talk about clean and unclean and holy and profane together*." But the ancient narrative mindset didn't like to do it that way. They liked to do part of it, *pause*, do another part. Do part of it, *pause*, and do another part and then come back to it. That's one of the ways in which they created this *chiastic* arrangement that helps us to know when the book begins and when it ends and what maybe is the focus of it all, the *day of atonement*. This is the one day each year that the high priest can go into the holy of holies to have Israel's sins forgiven, and to be in God's presence. This is the day of days. It's the high point of the year.

**A. Sacrificial System** (05:22):

Let's talk about **chapters 1-7**, the *sacrificial system*. There are *five offerings* that occur in the sacrificial system that they institute here. There's the *burnt offering*, the *grain offering*, the *peace offering*, the *sin offering*, and the *guilt offering*. I'll tell you a little bit about each one of those.

**1. Burnt offering** (05:46):

The sacrificial system, the *burnt offering*. The *burnt offering* is a sacrifice that offers atonement for sin. The animal is killed and totally consumed by a fire, since it represents the sinner who needs to restore his relationship with God. The worshiper identifies with the animal by laying his hands on its head before it's killed. So, there's a *transfer*. You say, "*I should be like this animal. The animal's acting as my substitute*." They slay the animal instead of slaying you.

Then it's completely offered up as a whole *burnt offering*. You get none of it back. Some offerings you get back. This is the same type of offering that Abraham was told to offer as Isaac. So, he was going to offer him all up, or that Jephthah did when he vowed to offer up whatever came out of his house as a whole *burnt offering*. It's the same one. The offering in Hebrew is called an *olah*. It just means, "*that which goes up*," because you get none of it back. They just say it's a whole going up offering or a whole *burnt offering*.

**2. The grain offering** (06:45):

The second offering is the *grain offering*. The *grain offering* is also listed as a gift or tribute offering because the Hebrew term for this grain offering actually means *gift*. It's called *minkhah*, which is a *gift offering* or a *grain offering*. The *grain offering* may be uncooked or cooked in various forms. A portion of the grain is taken and mixed with incense and burned as a gift to God. The rest is given to the priests. So, the whole *burnt offering*, no one gets any of it. The *grain offering*, some of it gets offered up, but the rest of it goes to the priests and that's how they make their income. In fact, that's how the *tithe* worked. The *tithe* was to pay the wages of the Levitical system. The *priest* got 10%, and then *Aaron* got 10% of that or 1%. So, all burnt up, partially burnt up. The rest goes to the priest.

**3. The peace offering** (07:33):

The *peace offering* is not like the *burnt offering*. You've heard the word, *Shalom*. This is *shelamim*, so it's a form of that. It's a *Shalom* or a *peace offering*. As opposed to the *burnt offering*, only part of the animal is burned on the altar to God. The rest is enjoyed by the worshipers themselves in the context of fellowship. Sometimes called a *fellowship offering*, because it is designed to promote *communion* *with God*. This is what many of the tithing rituals involve in Deuteronomy, so that you may rejoice before your God. So, you take your 10%, and you take it to the temple. Some goes to the priests, but the rest of it, you party with God using that stuff. That's what it was for. It was actually to gladden you or to cause you to rejoice in the Lord.

So that's the whole *burnt offering*, the *grain offering*, and the *peace offering*. You can also call the *peace offering* a *fellowship offering* because there it was, think of it like *communion*. You're there to eat and commune with God. It's a meal with Him and it's a *covenant meal*. You only eat with those in which you're in *covenant* with. You don't eat with the enemy.

**4. The sin offering** (08:41):

The *sin offering* is connected in large part due to infractions of ritual purity, and therefore is sometimes understood to be a *purification offering* or a *purification ritual*. When you become *unclean*, let's say you touch a leper, let's say like a scab or something is wrong with your skin. Or you just become unclean somehow. You touch a dead body, that kind of thing. You need to offer a sin offering so that you're ritually pure again and you can go in and *worship*. That's what that's for.

**5. The guilt offering** (09:10):

Then finally there is the *guilt offering*. The *guilt offering* involves a violation of any of the Lord's holy things. It also appears to be the one able to put a monetary value on sin, since *restitution* is part of the penalty. So, you have to pay for it plus 20%. For this reason, the sacrifice is sometimes called a *reparation offering*. So, let's say you do something wrong. Let's say the sin would be, I would steal someone's 10 ounces of oil. I have to restore that plus 20%. So, it's a *restitution offering* to clear your guilt.

Now the reason they have these offerings, all of them, is for *two reasons*. It's, one, is to promote your cleanness or ritual purity, both internally and externally. But also, then to allow you to have fellowship with God and be in His presence and worship. You cannot approach the Lord in any unclean state, either internally or externally. These are our means of promoting cleanness, temporary typological. The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin really. It just does so *symbolically*. You are *symbolically* recognizing that you need something greater than what you have. That you're not worthy. That's what those are, the sacrifices. We're going to see those return down here.

**B. Institution of the Priesthood** (10:35):

The *institution of the* *priesthood*. In Leviticus 8-10, is the *installation of the priest*. This is where Aaron and his sons are set apart for service in the holy place. They're given *priestly garments* and *anointed with oil* in order to identify them with the *tabernacle* and to set them apart in the *presence of God*. They offer *sacrifices* to atone for sins. This section also includes the tragic story of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, who offer unauthorized or strange fire before the Lord. They approach Him in an unworthy or an unsolicited fashion. God responds by consuming them with fire, thus serving as a warning of the dangers of the priesthood and of approaching God in an unworthy manner, either in the way in which you're not invited or in a way in which He's not instructed you to do.

**C. Laws of impurity** (11:20):

Next, in chapters 11-15, the *clean* and *unclean* things in daily life. So, this would include bodily discharges, things you come in contact with, what food you eat, childbirth, and leprosy. Those are the categories. You say, "*All the gross things in life*." You’ve got to remember back then, cooking involved slaughtering. You would come in contact with a lot of bad stuff. I'm so thankful I live in the day of grocery stores. I don't know how they did it a hundred years ago.

So, in this section, things that make you impure, things that require you to have sin offerings or guilt offerings. That's what this section is, 11-15. This leads up to the *day of atonement*. We're going to come back and talk about the *day of atonement*, so I'll skip that. Then we come back down here to *holy* and *profane* things in daily life, where we have things like *sacrifices*, *consumption of blood, sexual behavior, civil and religious life, priests, holy things, offerings, feasts, et cetera.*

This has a lot to do with *sexual purity* here. These are the kind of sexual activities that are not permitted, like un*ion with a sister, union with a cousin, union with a parent, union with an in-law,* all the abhorrent things that are outside of the design of the Genesis chapter two which consists of male, female, one flesh relationship. God is saying, "*Just in case you didn't get me the first time in Genesis two, I'm going to give you a whole lot of things*." It's a tough section to read, and a lot of euphemistic language in there as well. Like they won't even say *maternal incest*, because it so abhorrent to them. So, they just say, "*uncovering the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother*." That's euphemistic. Even the Bible draws a line, even talking about it in a particular way.

**D. The Day of Atonement** (13:26):

Then we go back to the legislation for the *priests* and the *festivals*, but really the big thing here is the *day of atonement*. What is the *day of atonement*? Or we know it more popularly today as Yom Kippur. Yom means *day*, Kippur means *atonement*. This is the day. This day is the only time anyone can enter the *holy of holies*. It can only be the *high priest* for the purpose of *purifying*, one, the *holy place* from the accumulation of sins of the year. It's like the *holy of holies*, the outer court just wells up with sin. Once a year, the *high priest* has to go in and office sacrifices to flush it all out.

These sins are seen as being carried off by the *scapegoat* that is driven out into the *wilderness*. So, here's what happens. There are two goats. One, you lay your hands on, lay all the sins of the people on, and you send it out to the wilderness. The other one, you take it in and you sacrifice it and use that to purify the *holy of holies*. It can only be done once a year. That was really the high point of the year, because it was the way in which it *typified* Israel's ultimate desire was to be in a *communion of God* and in that *holy place*. It's the place that we long to be. It's the center of the universe. It's the place that Jesus gives access to in the *true temple*.

Remember all of this is just a *copy* of something greater, a *shadow*, a *pattern*. If you want to understand why all of this is important, because what this is all saying is, "*How can I have access to the divine presence, which means satisfaction and joy and pleasure forever more, without being consumed*?" It's going to require a *priest* to intercede on your behalf and to get God's access to you somehow. It's going to require *sacrifices* because you're a sinner and so you're permanently unclean. What this points to is we already know in the language of this course, that Jesus is the better *tabernacle*. Jesus is the better *priest*. Jesus is the better *scapegoat*. The best place to look at this because of time, we don't have time to do everything, is to go to Hebrews 9-10.

Before I begin there, let me just show you. In Hebrews 9-10, they're going to talk about the *day of atonement* and what that means. But let me just read to you explicitly Leviticus 16:21-22, and then Leviticus 16:16, because that's what tells us the *method of* *atonement* and then the *purpose of atonement*. So, let's begin with the *method of atonement* in Leviticus 16:21. "*And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the inequities of the people and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall purify them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness, by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all of the inequities on itself to a remote area and he shall let the goat go free into the wilderness*." The *wilderness* is the place of the demons and all the bad things. That's the *method*.

Here's the *purpose*. In verse 16 of Leviticus 16, "*Thus he shall make atonement for the holy place because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleanness*." Verse 30 states, "*For on this day, shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins*." In a *temporary typological* fashion, just so you know. Okay.

Now the author of Hebrews in vv. 9-10, I'm going to read you. I wish I could read to you all of it, but I'm going to read to you bits of it. Then we'll talk about the other thing that's important besides *holiness* in Leviticus. So here I'm going to begin in Hebrews 9 and they're going to paint the context for us, where it's going to be talking about a contrast between the *old covenant* in Leviticus and the *new covenant* sacrifice in the New Testament.

Where the author says, "*Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness*." Do you see how he's talking about this? "*For a tent was prepared, the first section in which where the lampstand and the table and the bread of presence, it is called the holy place. Behind the second curtain was a second section called the most holy place*," so it has concentric degrees of holiness. The closer you get to the center, the more holy it is. "*And it had the golden altar of incense, the Ark of the Covenant, covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manana and Aaron's staff*,".

9:6, "*These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their duties. But in the second, only the high priest goes, but he only once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people, by which the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet open as long as the first section is still standing*." Listen to this in verse 9, "*which is symbolic for the present age*."

So, we're blocked from going to that holy place because of this present age. "*According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper*." See the problem? "*But deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of the reformation*."

So, they're talking about this being a temporary typological institution, and the problem is it can't fix the conscience of the person. We need something that can actually free us from guilt, not just cover us over from it.

Well, how does that happen? Well, 9:11 happens, "*But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, the one not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. He entered once for all into the holy of places, not by means of blood of goats and calves, but by the means of his own blood, thus securing eternal redemption*." 14, "*How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God*."

Now notice this in 15, "*Therefore He is the mediator*," that's what the priest is doing, "*of a new covenant. So that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant*," that is, the Mosaic covenant. It’s important to get those covenants right.

Now, watch this language here that's going to relate the *earthly tabernacle* to the *heavenly tabernacle* temple. "*Indeed, under the law*," that is what we're listening to in Leviticus, "*almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. Thus, it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rights, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf*."

Now this is one reason why I'm so opposed to this phenomenon that goes on. It’s where we're trying to reinstitute the *temple* in Jerusalem or reinstitute the *sacrificial system* in Jerusalem, that has red heifers ready to go. There's a big movement in that. I strongly oppose that movement because that was only a *temporary typological picture* of a *heavenly reality* where it says, "*pattern, copy, old*," right? Christ has entered into the *non-pattern*, the *non-copy*, the *non-old*, and offered the sacrifice that was originally intended. So, to want or desire that particular thing reestablished on earth is to deny the full and finished work of Christ. That is not a good thing. It states, "*For Christ entered into a holy place not made with human hands*," because they were copies, "*nor was it to offer Himself repeatedly as the high priest into the holy place every year*,". It says, "*For then Christ has to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world, but as it is, He's appeared once for all at the end of the age, to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself*."

I want to concentrate on that statement, “*once for all*”. That means we don't need any other *sacrifices*, any other *priesthood*, any other *work*. The word is *tetelestai* in Greek. It is finished. Jesus' words on the cross. Chapter 10, at the beginning, then we're done. "*For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come, instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year make perfect those who draw near*."

This is a really important part and concept for me. You need to understand that the *Mosaic administration* from Exodus to Deuteronomy is an important administration because it's a *shadow* of the good things to come. We study it and learn from it, because it actually points to and tells us and shows us good things to come. When you make a good thing, the ultimate thing, it will crush us. That's what an *idol* is, when a good thing becomes an ultimate thing. We don't want to make an *idol* out of the *Mosaic covenant*, in some sense. We want to make sure that we've got room for it to give way to the substance that comes in the *new covenant*, both in the *first* and *second coming*.

We've got to be careful in our theological arrangements that we don't see different epics and eras in terms of how God deals with His people. We see *one continuous covenant of grace* and *different administrations* that are *shadow* and *substance*, one pointing to the other, not in contradictory forms, but in actually substantive ways and in the true ways. So that's why I'm looking at these, is I'm looking at the highlighted words in my notes: "*new covenant, first covenant, copy, copy, shadow, true form.*" Do you see? In the text I was reading, there's all these key words that are *old* and *new*, *first* and *second*, *copy, shadow*, *true*.

We've got to keep that in our mind that when we're reading Exodus to Deuteronomy, we're seeing a *picture*. Let's put it this way. We don't know really what life was like in Eden because it's a very short narrative. So, God is in some sense giving us a bigger picture of what Eden should have looked like. So, in Leviticus, the *tabernacle* was built. They have it in the middle. God's in it. Then they station all the people around it. Then they put the priests in the right places. It looks like paradise out there; in the way it's gone from chaos to cosmos. God has taken that and He's made a new garden of Eden event, with Him dwelling in the middle of it. That's why you can't offer strange fire without getting consumed by it.

That's the *theology of sacrifice* that permeates this book, but it's the *theology* that we're not trying to reinstitute at all. It's gone and done, but it points us to the person and work of Christ. Christ will be the true and better sacrifice. He'll be the true and better priest. He won't need to offer a sacrifice for Himself to be clean. He already will be clean. So, the sacrifice He offers is on our behalf. He's the only one worthy to do that.

**E. Love Thy Neighbor** (24:56):

The *second major theme* that is in the book of Leviticus is the *love your neighbor theme*, right? I really like this, the *love your neighbor theme*, which is really a major part of the *Decalogue*. There are 10 commandments that we're going to cover more in Deuteronomy, right? The *first part* is how do you love and worship God in the right way? And the *second part* is, how do you love your neighbor as yourself? Well, you honor your father and mother, you don't lie, cheat, steal, right? And don't covet, all that kind of business, murder. And so, this we're into that section.

A *major theme* in the book of Leviticus is *love your neighbor*. So, Leviticus 19:18, for example, "*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am Yahweh*." That's so great. Leviticus, 19:18, "*You shall not take vengeance or bear grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord*." That's very applicable to the context of the church. "*You shall not take vengeance on or bear grudges against those in the kingdom of God, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

Not only shall you love your own people, the sons of your own people, Leviticus 19:18, it also says in Leviticus 19:34, "*You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as a native among you*." That is a radical statement there. "*You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as a native among you, and you shall love him as yourself*." Why? "*For you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh, your God*." I love how he punctuates it that way. This is me saying that, that *formula* right there.

We have Jesus commenting on this in Mark 12:29-31, "*Jesus answered and said," asking about the most important of the laws, "'The most important is this: Hear, oh Israel, the Lord is our God. The Lord is one.*'" Or you could say, "*The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. And you shall love Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. And the second is this, you shall love the neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these*," which is a summary of the *Decalogue* right? Love God as hard as you can and love your neighbor as hard as you can. In these, all the *law* and the *prophets* are summarized. So, union with the father, and the source of the image. It is important to love for the image itself, your fellow men, and women.

So those are the *two main themes* that I like to highlight in the book of Leviticus, *holiness* *and how do you dwell in God's presence and not be consumed*? Then *loving thy neighbor*, *how are you to treat everyone around you, and why is that*? You were once aliens and strangers. How can you not forgive someone who offends you, in light of the fact of how much you've been forgiven by the Lord? Whatever you've been wronged in this life is nothing compared to the wrong that he bore on your behalf. So, you can say, "*No big deal*."

**III. Leviticus as the Gospel Promised Beforehand** (27:49):

The book of Leviticus is *the gospel promised beforehand* in these ways*, Jesus is the true and better priest* and even *high priest*. So, Hebrews 4:14, "*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the son of God. Let us hold fast to our confession, for we do not have a high priest who's unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who knew every aspect or respect, has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find help in the time of need*."

Do you see the difference there? "*Yet without sin*." The high priests had to offer sacrifice for their own sins. Jesus did not. *Jesus is the true and better sacrifice*. Not like the blood of sheep and goats that had to be offered over and over again. But the once for all sacrifice. Hebrews 7:26, "*For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins, then for those of the people, since He did this once for all, when He offered Himself up. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than law, appoints a son who's been made perfect forever*."

All of that weight is born by one person, all out here. *Jesus is the true and better holiness*. This is something that we see in the *gospels*, and I like to point this out. In this time, if I were to touch a leper or if I were to touch a dead body, or if I were to have some kind of skin discharge, bodily discharge, I would be considered *unclean*. If I touched anyone in that way, their *uncleanness* would transfer to me. The transfer is from the *unclean* to the *clean*. No human ever came and touched the *unclean* and made it *clean* until Jesus showed up. It reverses the trend. This one person, it's like a miracle every time.

(30:00):

For example, Matthew 11:5, "*When the blind received their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them*." Remember when Jesus puts His hand in the mud and spits on it, and rubs it in his eyes and the guy sees? He's the potter shaping the clay. He's transferring. He's taking their *uncleanness* and making it *clean*.

(30:24):

Or do you remember the woman who had the discharge, in Mark 5:24-29? "*A large crowd followed and pressed around him and a woman there, who'd been a subject of bleeding for 12 years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and spent all she had, yet instead of getting better, she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak*," which would've made him unclean, because he saw her. "*'If I just touch His clothes, I'll be healed immediately.*' *Her bleeding stopped, and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.*" So, her uncleanness is reversed by touching that which can never be made unclean.

*Jesus is our true and better high priest*. *He's our true and better sacrifice*. *He's our true and better cleanness, our holiness*. That's the end of Leviticus lecture in 33 minutes and four seconds, just what I try to stipulate for.

So, would you say that the *theme* *of reaching out to the whole world* that is alluded to in the Abrahamic covenant is included all throughout scripture? In Leviticus you have how you treat the *foreigners* and even in Christ's ministry, He goes to the place *east* *of the Jordan*. It doesn't just start with Ruth, the Moabite, and Rahab, the Canaanite.

It doesn't just start with Acts, with the *Jerusalem*, *Judea* thing. It's starting out right from *creation*.

**VII. Conclusion** (32:02):

The interesting thing about the *Old Testament* is that the nations are supposed to stream to Jerusalem in order for them to bear witness to that. Jerusalem is to be like a light shining on a hill. In the *New Testament*, it's not a coming into Jerusalem, but it's a going out of Jerusalem, the *gospel* being proclaimed from *Jerusalem*, *Judea*, *to the* *outermost parts of the world*. It's different *directionally*, but it's the same *concept*. But instead of coming to *Jerusalem*, here's the thing, Jerusalem's coming to you. That's the good news of the *gospel*. It's not hidden from you anymore. It's streaming out towards you.

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| **Leviticus, Book of** |

The title “Leviticus” comes from the Latin Vulgate, which has adapted it from the LXX. The Greek word is *leuitikon*, an adjective meaning “Levitical” or “that which pertains to the Levites.” This is perhaps not the best heading for the book, first of all because the name “Levite” appears in the document only four times, and these in the span of two verses (25:32–33). The book actually has more to do with directions for the entire congregation of Israel and for the priests rather than the entire tribe of Levi. An old adage is appropriate here: “*All priests are Levites, but not all Levites are priests*.” Later Jewish scribes (Tannaitic period, ca. 200 BC–AD 200) were more accurate when they called the book the *torat kohanim*—that is, “*the book of the priests*” or “*the manual of the priests*.”

The title of the book in the Hebrew Bible is *wayyiqrāʾ*, which is the opening word of the text, meaning “*and he called*.” This is a common Hebrew practice; so, for instance, the book of Exodus is titled *wəʾēlleh šəmôt*, which are the opening two words of the Hebrew text, meaning “*and these are the names of*.”

**Structure and Genre**

In the Hebrew canon, Leviticus is the middle book of the Pentateuch, and thus some consider it “*the heart of the Pentateuch’s narrative*” (Morales, 27). This is perhaps an overstatement, since Leviticus builds on the central theme of the Pentateuch presented at the end of Exodus. Exodus has closed with a description of the construction of the tabernacle and God descending in theophanic form into the holy of holies (40:34–38). There, God will meet with his people through a sacrificial system under the oversight and mediation of a priesthood. The tabernacle is at the heart of Hebrew worship and ritual. What are now needed are rules to regulate the practices of worship in Israel at the tabernacle (and later at the temple). That is a major purpose of Leviticus and one of the main reasons it was placed in the canon immediately after Exodus.

Leviticus is similar to a modern book of church order: it contains a series of manuals or directories that specify how the OT church is to operate and worship. There are six self-contained manuals in the book (Currid, *Leviticus*, 18–19):

Directory 1: Manual of sacrifice for the entire congregation (1:1–6:7)

Directory 2: Manual of sacrifice for the priesthood (6:8–7:38)

Directory 3: Cleanliness Code (11:1–15:33)

Directory 4: Manual of the Day of Atonement for the high priest (16:1–34)

Directory 5: Holiness Code (17:1–26:46)

Directory 6: Manual for the funding of the sanctuary (27:1–34)

These six directories are *legislative*. In fact, only two passages in the entire book are not *regulatory*, and those are the incidents of chaps. 8–10 and 24:10–23. The *first narrative* deals with the ordination of the priesthood, the beginning of formal worship in the tabernacle, and the profanation of worship led by Nadab and Abihu. The *second narrative* recounts the stoning of the blasphemer. Both of these accounts, however, are related to the surrounding legislative prescriptions. Both serve as examples or illustrations of the legal points being made in their contexts by the biblical writer.

**Composition**

No book in the OT claims divine origination as frequently as Leviticus. Thirty-eight times in twenty-seven chapters the text says, “*The Lord said to Moses* …” (Rooker, 39). The opening words of the book state, “*The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting*” (1:1). And the document ends with the statement, “*These are the commands the Lord gave Moses*” (27:34). These two verses serve as an *inclusio*, thus underscoring one of the author’s principal teachings: *the means and methods of Israel’s worship and set-apartness are revealed from God to his people*. That truth is further emphasized by the fact that each of the six directories of formal worship begins with “*The Lord said to Moses* …” (6:8; 11:1; 16:2; 17:1; 27:1; cf. 1:1).

The rest of the OT confirms the view that the book came from the Lord and was delivered by the hand of Moses (e.g., 2 Chron. 23:18; 30:16; 35:12). The NT additionally bears witness to the revelation of Leviticus from God to Moses (see Matt. 8:2–4; Luke 2:22; Rom. 10:5). The fact of the matter for the biblical authors was that “*Leviticus is a narrative about God speaking to Moses repeatedly*” (Vasholz, 11).

Traditional Judaism held to the belief that God revealed the torah, including Leviticus, to Moses at Mount Sinai and then Moses recorded the words of God (e.g., Rabbi Akiva [AD 50–135] in Zevah. 115b; Levine, xxvi). The early church agreed. For example, in the first century AD, Clement of Rome wrote, “The blessed Moses … noted down in the sacred books all the instructions which were given him” (1 Clem. 43:1, quoted in Wells, 191). And the second-century AD church father Justin Martyr comments, “The History of Moses is by far more ancient than all profane histories … which he wrote in the Hebrew character by the Divine inspiration” (*Hort.* 12; Wells, 186–91). This has been the dominant position of the church through the centuries.

Modern source criticism disagrees with the traditional views of the formation and composition of Leviticus. It argues forcefully that the book was compiled from a variety of different sources over a long period of time. The book, therefore, had a complex development. Early source critics believed that Leviticus belonged to the priestly stratum called P and that priests produced it during the postexilic period (ca. fifth century BC). Later critics determined that P itself was comprised of multiple sources, such as a self-contained document called H (= Holiness Code) found in Lev. 17–26. Many argue that P edited H. Another position says that, in fact, H edited P (Milgrom, 27). Such are the diverse speculations that dominate the study of source criticism.

**Leviticus in the Rest of the OT**

The teachings of Leviticus are commonly found and cited in the remainder of the OT. Regarding previous historical material in Genesis and Exodus, Leviticus codifies laws already in practice. Michael Fishbane (95) is right when he says, “*The received legal codes are thus a literary expression of ancient Israelite legal wisdom*.” In other words, many of the regulations of Leviticus have a long history prior to their codification and standardization at Sinai. For example, the first three offerings enumerated in the Levitical manual of sacrifice (1:1–3:17) were already practiced by God’s people: the *burnt offering* (Gen. 8:20; 22:3), the *grain offering* (Gen. 4:3), and the *peace offering* (Exod. 20:24; 24:5). A *priesthood* also existed prior to its codification in Leviticus. Adam, the first human, served as a priest in the temple of the garden of Eden (Beale, 9–24). Melchizedek was a “priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18). According to Exod. 19:6, God proclaimed that his people would be “*a kingdom of priests*.”

In addition to *codification*, Leviticus contains *echoes* of earlier material from Genesis and Exodus. For instance, the *tabernacle*, in which the priests serve as regulated by the laws of Leviticus, is an echo of the original *garden temple* *of Eden*, where Adam served as priest. The tabernacle reflects the very presence of God with his people, as did the first temple in Eden (Lev. 9:6, 23).

Many of the laws of Leviticus are also a direct fulfillment of earlier commands, particularly from Exodus. For instance, in Exod. 29:44, God says that he will consecrate the tabernacle and the priesthood in the future. That promise is fulfilled in Lev. 8, in which Moses anoints both the tabernacle (v. 10) and the priesthood (v. 30) and thus consecrates them.

The later books of the OT allude to Leviticus in a myriad of ways. As an example, I will briefly consider Ezekiel’s use of the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26). Scholars have long understood that Ezekiel responds to the crisis of the exile by preaching to the people of his day, using that passage extensively (see, in particular, Lyons, 12–26). *First*, Ezekiel sees that the Holiness Code is authoritative for the people of his day, and he appeals to it often (e.g., Ezek. 18:6–9). *Second*, he uses the Holiness Code to bring accusations of disobedience against the people (e.g., 22:7–12), including numerous sexual laws (e.g., 18:6; 22:10). *Third*, the prophet uses the conditional covenantal judgments of Lev. 26:14–39 and applies them as soon coming to pass against the people of his day (see esp. Ezek. 14:13–21). And *finally*, Ezekiel draws on the very images of the conditional covenantal blessings of Lev. 26:1–13 to point to a future eschaton. He pronounces that one day God’s people will be free from harmful beasts (Ezek. 34:25) and that they will not be exploited by other nations (34:28). It will be a time of great abundance in rain and crop yield (34:26–27). In that day, God will cause his people to be fruitful and multiply (36:29–30). The Immanuel principle will be central to their existence (36:28).

**Leviticus in the NT**

Leviticus was at one time the first book of the Hebrew Bible read and studied in the synagogue (Wenham, vii). In the church, however, little attention is paid to it, for it seems to be full of rules and regulations that have nothing to do with or say to the church. Really, what application could there be to the modern church regarding food laws, rules for skin diseases, and precepts of house fungi? How could such archaic rules have any significance to the church? This is a complicated and hard issue, and we can only do some initial digging here. However, we can certainly provide a broad picture and a window into the issue by considering some of the major motifs of Leviticus and how they relate to the NT. We will consider three major themes of Leviticus and their relationship to the NT: the sacrificial system, the priesthood, and the concept of holiness.

***The Hebrew sacrificial system.*** The sacrificial system laid down in Leviticus and followed throughout the OT has ceased for the people of God. The system is now fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. Christ offered himself as the final sacrifice, once and for all, for the people of God (Heb. 10:8–14). They no longer need a physical, temporal sanctuary in which the animal sacrifices take place, because “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev. 21:22). The sacrifices themselves are unnecessary because of Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross, his resurrection, and his ascension to the heavenly temple.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that because the work of Christ abrogated the sacrificial system of Leviticus, it is not important for the church to study it. The reality is that the sacrificial laws of Leviticus serve as pointers and shadows of the work of Christ; they are forerunners of his final atoning work. By studying Leviticus, the church realizes the depth and pervasiveness of human sin and sees that there is a wide chasm between a holy God and an unholy people. The sacrificial laws underscore the absolute necessity of atonement in humanity’s being made right with God. And while the sacrificial system demonstrates these things, it also reflects its own insufficiency to meet these needs. The author of Hebrews tells us that “*it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*” (10:4). The Hebrew sacrificial system was not efficacious in and of itself, but it pointed to something greater to come, and that is the fulfillment of the sacrificial system in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

One may rightly ask, How, then, were OT believers made right with God if not by the sacrificial system delineated in Leviticus and elsewhere? In other words, how was peace attained between a righteous God and sinful humanity prior to the cross of Christ? How were sins forgiven and reconciliation procured? Throughout church history, many commentators have argued that people in the OT were saved by keeping torah. This is a great error. Paul argues vehemently against it, because “*no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law*” (Rom. 3:20; cf. 3:23; Gal. 2:16). The reality is that no individual can keep torah (James 2:10). Consequently, no human is saved and made right with God by keeping the law. Torah, in other words, is not the solution to humanity’s sin and alienation from God. Its purposes are to show clearly humanity’s sin (Rom. 3:20) and to be a “guardian” or tutor (Gal. 3:24) to lead humanity to the true solution to their condition.

The sacrifices in Leviticus served as types or pointers to the atoning work of Christ. Persons in the OT obtained forgiveness and acceptance from God only as they offered these sacrifices in true penitence and faith in the coming Redeemer. The sacrificial system was merely a shadow of what was to come—that is, the final, ultimate sacrifice of God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. It is only through the sacrifice of Christ that anyone is saved and made right with God. In addition, one needs to be careful not to say that OT believers were saved by the promise of the coming Redeemer. No one is saved by a promise. People are saved only through the reality of the fulfillment of the promise in the coming and work of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the most striking shadow of the Levitical sacrificial system that points to Christ is the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). A strong case can be made that Paul refers to the Day of Atonement in his classic statement on atonement in Rom. 3:21–26 (Schreiner, 191–95; Moo, 231–37). At the heart of this passage is Paul’s use of the word *hilastērion*, which can be translated as “*mercy seat*” and ought to be understood in reference to the lid of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies in the tabernacle/temple (Exod. 25:17–22). An alternate reading of Rom. 3:24b–25a would be “*the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as a mercy seat in his blood through faith*.” In other words, Christ was the final, ultimate sacrifice offered on the Day of Atonement.

***The priesthood.*** The overseer and administrator of the sacrificial system in Israel is the Aaronic priesthood. Leviticus 8 describes the consecration and ordination of that priesthood at the command of Yahweh. Throughout the chapter, the formulaic phrase “*as Yahweh commanded*” appears seven times, and it provides structure and symmetry to the passage (Klingbeil, 509–19). Leviticus 9 then records the first sacrifices offered by Aaron in the tabernacle on his own behalf as high priest, on behalf of the priesthood, and on behalf of the people of Israel. It needs to be underscored that the Israelite priesthood presents offerings not only for the people but also for themselves, because they are also sinful and weak. The author of Hebrews understands this well when he says, “*For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness*” (7:28). In addition, the sacrifices offered by and through the priesthood are continuous—that is, *day after day*, *week after week*, *month after month*, and *year after year*, the priests monotonously and repeatedly offer the same sacrifices for all Israel. There appears to be no finality to it.

There is, however, impermanence to the Aaronic priesthood itself. As the writer to the Hebrews says, “*Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office*” (7:23). And as well, the Aaronic priesthood has ended; it ceased to exist after the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70. There is finality in that reality.

Christ, however, has come as the final high priest, but not according to the priesthood of Aaron, which has ended. Psalm 110 is the most frequently cited messianic psalm in the NT. Yahweh says to the Messiah that he will be a great king with utmost authority and a royal priest “in the order of Melchizedek” (v. 4). Melchizedek is introduced in Gen. 14 as both a priest and a king. The combination of these two offices, while not unusual in the ancient Near East, was rare, if not nonexistent, in Israel. Its uniqueness in Israel becomes a sign for the coming Messiah, who will combine the two offices in his person (Ps. 110; Zech. 6:12–13).

The author of Hebrews deals in detail with the relationship between Melchizedek and the Messiah, and he argues that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Ps. 110; he even quotes Ps. 110:4 twice to underscore that relationship (5:6; 7:17). In Heb. 7, the author establishes that the priestly order of Melchizedek finds its climax and fulfillment in Jesus. The topic is complex and lengthy, so we will consider only the first three verses of chap. 7, which lay the groundwork for the teaching by drawing parallels between Jesus and Melchizedek (Currid, *Genesis*, 289).

1. Melchizedek is described as a priestly king, and Jesus is the same (v. 1).

2. Melchizedek’s name means “king of righteousness,” and his office is “king of peace/Salem”; righteousness and peace are two characteristics of the Messiah’s reign (v. 2).

3. Melchizedek is not of the Aaronic line. Jesus, as well, descends not from that priestly line but from the tribe of Judah (vv. 3, 14).

4. Genesis does not record the birth or death of Melchizedek, and this is symbolic of the eternal priesthood of Jesus: “Resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever” (v. 3). Jesus, like Melchizedek, “has a permanent priesthood” because he continues forever (v. 24).

Melchizedek, the priestly king at the time of Abraham, is a type or foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. He is a historical figure who points ahead to the priestly kingship of Jesus. He is the shadow, while Christ is the reality.

According to the author of Hebrews, Jesus is not merely the fulfillment and climax of the OT priesthood but, further, the final, ultimate high priest. He is the eternal, sinless high priest who offers himself as the sacrificial victim. The writer of Hebrews proclaims this point poignantly when he says, “Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (7:26–27). Andrew Jukes (43) puts it well: “Christ is the offering, Christ is the priest, Christ is the offerer.”

***Holiness.*** Another dominant motif of Leviticus is *holiness*. In fact, an entire manual or directory is dedicated to it, often referred to as the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26). The Hebrew term for “*holiness*” is the root *qdš*, and it is used frequently in this manual (e.g., 20:7–8; 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32). It commonly means “*to be set apart, wholly other, unique, uncommon*.” Thomas McComiskey (786–89) rightly defines it like this: “*A basic element of Israelite religion was the maintenance of an inviolable distinction between the spheres of the sacred and the common or profane*.” Israel was to be different than the world, especially as they related to the nations surrounding them.

The foundation of and paradigm for Israel’s holiness is the holiness of God. In Lev. 19:2, God declares to the people through Moses, “*Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy*.” God’s essential nature is one of holiness (Isa. 6:3). His people are called to emulate him—that is, to think and act like him. Holiness is therefore *imitatio Dei* (imitation of God).

The Holiness Code makes clear that every area of life is subject to the concept of holiness. So, for example, Lev. 19 alone addresses *family life* (v. 3), the *sacrificial system* (vv. 5–8), *economics* (vv. 9–10), *societal relationships* (vv. 11–14, 17–18), *judicial issues* (vv. 15–16), and *worship* (v. 4). No area of life is isolated from the concept of holiness. All things are to be brought under the lordship of God and subject to his teachings and statutes. As one author remarks, “*No area of life is exempt from the demand to be holy, for Israel is separated as a holy people to Yahweh*” (Dumbrell, 44).

Holiness is not merely found in the Holiness Code; it pervades the entire book of Leviticus. For example, Lev. 11:1–23 describes the *dietary restrictions*, or *kashrut laws*, that God places upon Israel. The purpose of these laws has been a matter of debate for ages. Some believe they are primarily hygienic; others see them as polemical against foreign, pagan worship; and still others understand them to be merely arbitrary distinctions (see discussion in Currid, *Leviticus*, 140–43). The key to understanding the dietary laws is found later in the chapter, where God tells his people not to defile themselves with unclean animals: “*I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground*” (11:44). The food distinctions are primarily symbolic of *holiness*—that is, “*the division into clean foods and unclean foods corresponded to the division between holy Israel and the Gentile world*” (Wenham, 170). Clean animals represent set-apart Israel, and unclean animals the common, pagan nations. Consequently, whenever the people of Israel eat, they are reminded of their position as the set-apart people of God. The purpose of the food laws is to “*imbue the mind of Israel with moral distinctions*” (Bonar, 210).

The issue of the application of the food laws to the early church was a major source of conflict (see Acts 15). They were no longer binding (see 10:10–16), because the covenant relationship was no longer centered in the physical nation of Israel but extended to all peoples, regardless of nationality. In other words, the kashrut was not to be kept by the church because these laws did not symbolize the holiness or set-apart nature of the people of God.

Even with the abrogation of laws such as the food restrictions, it would be a mistake to dismiss the concept of holiness as applying to the church. When speaking to the church throughout the world, Peter says, “*As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’* ” (1 Pet. 1:14–16). Peter here quotes Lev. 11:44 as yet applicable to the church. Holiness is *imitatio Dei*—that is, emulation of God. The people of God today are yet called to do that and bring every area of life under the lordship of Christ. As Paul says, “*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God*” (1 Cor. 10:31), and, “*Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (Col. 3:17).

*Sacrifices*, *priesthood*, and *holiness* are only three examples of the rich connections between Leviticus and the NT. Other areas of study are equally fertile, such as the *Hebrew calendar* in Leviticus and its fulfillment in the NT (see my article “Feasts and Festivals” elsewhere in the dictionary).

**Conclusion**

For the Christian, the heart of Leviticus is the teaching of the great depth and seriousness of human sin. Humankind’s unholiness separates them from a holy God; there is a deep chasm between God and humanity. Leviticus, however, teaches that the chasm may be bridged and that people can be made right with God. Reconciliation requires atonement. But the cultic system of Leviticus is insufficient; it cannot make atonement for humankind’s sin or bring peace between God and humanity. It points to the need for something greater. It demands a final, sufficient sacrifice offered by a final, sufficient high priest for a final, sufficient atonement. More than any other book in the OT, Leviticus foreshadows and prefigures the coming of the Messiah and his final work of atonement.

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Chapter One

**Leviticus within the Pentateuch: a theological structure**

**Introduction**

The primary theme and theology of Leviticus (and of the Pentateuch as a whole) is *YHWH’s opening a way for humanity to dwell in the divine Presence*. This theme will be found to encompass the narrative storyline of the Pentateuch, as well as the prominent role of the tabernacle cultus within it. Indeed, the theme of dwelling in the divine Presence, like a kernel sprouting up from the soil of the Pentateuch’s heart, wends its way through biblical history and branches out literarily into various cluster-bearing vines, vines never severed from their root.

Increasingly, scholars have come to appreciate the significance of literary structure for determining the meaning of a work: that the form conveys meaning. In this chapter, therefore, we will consider the structure of the Pentateuch in its final form, examining how that structure contributes to the stated theological theme of Leviticus.

**The structure of the Pentateuch**

We will now explore the Pentateuch’s overarching structure. I will argue that by examining the highest macrostructural level of the Pentateuch one is able to sound out the deepest level—the bedrock—of its meaning. In doing so we will find that the final shape of the Pentateuch sets up the priestly cultus quite literally as a light upon a hill.

*The centre of the Pentateuch: Leviticus*

Perhaps the most obvious structural feature of the Pentateuch is that it *is* a ‘Pentateuch’, a ‘five-volume’ or ‘five-scrolled’ book. Many scholars have noted that this five-book structure, with Leviticus at the centre, is not likely to have been coincidental. The notion that it simply took five scrolls to fit the entire Torah, an idea justly dubbed ‘flimsy’ by Auld,2 does not adequately account for the cut-off points of each book nor for the symmetry of the collection taken together: Exodus and Numbers are nearly the same length (16,713 and 16,413 words respectively) while Leviticus, the central book, is by far the shortest (11,950 words—half the length of Genesis). Moreover, chronological markers set off all five books of the Pentateuch as separate units.4 Likewise, that the psalter was deliberately divided into five books manifests a relevant awareness that the Pentateuch’s fivefold structure is theologically significant.

Once the fivefold nature of the Pentateuch is in view, the centrality of Leviticus becomes readily apparent. Thematically, there is also good reason to believe the Pentateuch is structured concentrically. Genesis and Deuteronomy both end with a patriarch (Jacob, Moses) blessing the twelve tribes before dying outside the land, and Exodus and Numbers have many parallel events, framing Leviticus as the central book. A. C. Leder summarizes:

In the concentric structure of the Pentateuch parallels between Exodus and Numbers suggest that they constitute a frame for Leviticus. Parallels between Genesis and Deuteronomy not only frame Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers thematically, they also provide the beginning and conclusion to the linear sequence of the entire pentateuchal narrative. Thus, Genesis through Deuteronomy exhibits an ABCB′A′ organizational format in which Deuteronomy returns to and complements the themes of Genesis, and Numbers returns to and complements the themes of Exodus. This leaves Leviticus occupying the narrative centre of the Pentateuch, as illustrated in the chart below.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **A GENESIS** | Separation from the nations/Blessing/Seeing the land/Descendants and the land |  |  |
| **B EXODUS** |  | Israel’s desert journeys/Apostasy and plagues/Pharaoh and magicians/First-born/Levites |  |
| **C LEVITICUS** |  |  | Sacrifices/Cleanliness/Holiness |
| **B′ NUMBERS** |  | Israel’s desert journeys/Apostasy and plagues/Balak and Balaam/First-born/Levites |  |
| **A′ DEUTERONOMY** | Separation from the nations/Blessing/Seeing the land/Descendants and the land |  |  |

Moshe Kline (2006) proposes a similar schematic structure of the Pentateuch:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Genesis | Prologue |
| Exodus | Leaving Egypt |
| Building the **tabernacle** |
| Leviticus | The **tabernacle** service |
| Numbers | Dedicating the **tabernacle** |
| Preparing to enter Canaan |
| Deuteronomy | Epilogue |

The symmetry is more than broadly thematic however. Wenham notes, for example, that while Genesis appears to serve as an introductory prologue and Deuteronomy as a reflective epilogue, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers hang closely together by three extended journey-stop cycles:

More narrowly, the ring structure of Exodus 15:22–Numbers 21:18 proposed by A. Schart highlights both the similarities between Exodus and Numbers and the significance of Sinai within the Pentateuch:

A Exod. 15:22–25 transformation of water from bitter to sweet

B 17:1–7 water from the rock

C 17:8–16 Amalekite—Israelite war

D 18 leadership relief for Moses

E 18:27 the Midianite Hobab, Moses’ father-in-law

F 19:1–2 arrival at Sinai

SINAI

F′ Num. 10:11–23 departure from Sinai

E′ 10:29–32 the Midianite Hobab, Moses’ father-in-law

D′ 11 leadership relief for Moses

C′ 14:39–45 Amalekite—Israelite war

B′ 20:1–13 water from the rock

A′ 21:16–18 the spring

The centrality of Sinai, the locus for the archetypal advent of YHWH, demonstrates the theological emphasis of theophany and divine Presence within the Pentateuch. Narrowing further within this central Sinai section (Exod. 19 to Num. 10), which is itself set off by itinerary notices, there are significant signals as to the literary integrity of the book of Leviticus. With reference to the tabernacle, the book is framed by a date notice:

G Exod. 40:17 1st day of 1st month of 2nd year—‘the tabernacle was raised up’

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G′ Num. 1:1 1st day of 2nd month of 2nd year—‘the tabernacle of meeting’

That the tabernacle structure coincides with the book of Leviticus supports Mary Douglas’s reading of Leviticus as something of a literary tour of the tabernacle. C. R. Smith also points out how the second half of Exodus deals primarily with setting up the tabernacle, while the first half of Numbers is concerned with taking it down, Leviticus itself comprising God’s speeches from the tabernacle. He notes, along with Knierim,14 that Leviticus 1:1 (‘YHWH summoned Moses, and spoke to him *from the tent of meeting*’) signals the highest level in the macrostructure of the Sinai pericope, and is bookended by Numbers 1:1 (‘YHWH spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, *in the tent of meeting*’), betraying a deliberate effort to seclude Leviticus as a distinct section. Rendtorff likewise points out the intentional nature of its composition, being ‘the only book in the Pentateuch that takes place completely and exclusively at Sinai—and which at the same time takes place at and in the tent of meeting, the sanctum’. With relative confidence, then, we may affirm Damrosch’s statement that Leviticus is the very heart of the Pentateuch’s narrative.

*The centre of Leviticus: day of Atonement*

Setting our focus now within the confines of Leviticus, atonement is one of the major themes of this central book, and several scholars have posited the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 as the book’s literary centre. This conclusion appears well founded as it can be reached from a variety of approaches. Outlining Leviticus according to its alternating genres of law and narrative, C. R. Smith proposes a sevenfold division: law, narrative, law, narrative, law, narrative, law, with the central section being the narrative description of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. Zenger comes to a concentrically arranged sevenfold structure,19 with chapters 16–17 at the centre: 1–7, sacrifice regulations; 8–10, priestly duties; 11–15, daily purity; 16–17, atonement and reconciliation; 18–20, daily holiness; 21–22, priestly duties; 23–26, sacrifice and festival regulations—and here Ruwe critiques well his failure to isolate chapter 16. Although Ruwe himself posits Leviticus 1–8 and 9–26 as the highest structural division of Leviticus, his subdivisions (e.g. positing a concentric structure for chs. 11–15, a coherent independent complex for chs. 17–27 and delineating ch. 16 as its own section due to the chronological notice of v. 1, and the exclusive address to Aaron in v. 2) mark the central character of the Day of Atonement. And in his published doctoral dissertation Warning analyses the structure of Leviticus according to its thirty-seven divine speeches, arriving at Leviticus 16 as the literary centre, with eighteen divine speeches on either side. Finally, based on formal devices, such as repetitions and interconnections, and marking Leviticus 1:1, 16:1–2aα and 25:1 as macrostructural divine-speech introductions, Luciani also proposes a concentric structure, with Leviticus 16 at the centre. Rendtorff’s conclusion appears judicious, therefore, that on both a formal and thematic level there are sound reasons to speak of the central position of chapter 16 within the book of Leviticus. Thus construed, the Day of Atonement becomes the literary and thematic centre of the Pentateuch. Bibb comes to a similar conclusion:

The chapter itself [16] is a microcosm of the book’s ritual world, a subtle integration of narrative past and timeless, disembodied ritual. In any case, it is clearly the central pivot point of the book and any literary analysis must account for its importance in the structure and the message of Leviticus.

Based on an article by Shea (1986), R. M. Davidson’s diagram of the Pentateuch, which I have altered slightly, highlights the structural position and role of Leviticus 16:

**Diagram of Leviticus**

Therefore, while precise markers and thematic labels will undoubtedly vary among scholars who propose a sevenfold structure (at some level), the following outline offers a suitable overview to Leviticus:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Lev 1–7 Sacrifices  8–10 Institution of priesthood/inauguration of cultus  11–15 Clean/unclean in daily life |  | *Approaching God*  Atonement |
| 16 Day of Atonement | — | Judgment/Cleansing |
| 17–20 Holy/profane in daily life  21–22 Legislation for the priesthood  23–27 Festivals / sacred time |  | *Communion with God*  Holiness |

As is evident from the stepped arrangement, and in agreement with Zenger (1999) and Luciani (2005) among others, I posit a concentric structure, leading up to the Day of Atonement as the ‘capstone of the sacrificial rituals’ and flowing out of that ceremony into ‘the subject of holy living’. From, perhaps, the most basic vantage point, one may consider Leviticus in two halves, with chapter 16 serving as the fulcrum, summing up the sacrificial cult and functioning as a segue to the call for holiness. The first half deals primarily with the approach to God through blood, while the second half is taken up with life in God’s Presence through increasing holiness, the overall goal being fellowship and union with God. Once more, the *aim* of Levitical legislation must be kept in view. Whether the laws pertain to sacrifice, to distinguishing between clean and unclean, or to ethical and moral behaviour, the aim of the laws is fellowship and union with the living God. For this reason, though Leviticus is often characterized thematically by holiness, it is preferable to discern holiness not as an end in itself but rather as a means to an end, which is the real theme, the abundant life of joy with God in the house of God. This point may be illustrated according to the primary subject matter characterizing each half of Leviticus, blood and holiness, respectively. Leviticus 17:11 sets the whole sacrificial legislation of chapters 1–16 within this framework when it explains *life* as the significance of (cultic or sacrificial) blood:

For the life [‘soul’, *nepeš*] of the flesh, it is in the blood, and I myself have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement upon your lives [‘souls’, *napšōtêkem*], for it is the blood that, by means of the life [‘soul’, *bannepeš*], makes atonement.

While the idea of death is certainly present in the ritual immolation of animals, yet the pervasive emphasis throughout the first half of Leviticus upon the blood of animals is to be understood rather as an emphasis upon life. This is especially the case as that life is brought into the divine Presence in the holy of holies in Leviticus 16. The overlap between blood and the holiest place occurs, furthermore, precisely upon the holiest ritual act on the Day of Atonement, at the transition point to the second half of Leviticus, with its emphasis upon holiness—an emphasis that begins with the sanctity of blood in ch. 17, though the root for holiness (*qdš*) is not used. The set-apartness of blood for sacred use, because of its significance as life, leads to the subject of holy living (chs. 17–27). Then, just as with the blood’s signifying life in the first half of Leviticus, so, too, with holiness in the second half. Holiness, properly conceived, pertains to fullness of life, a perspective that will be grasped more clearly when we consider in the next chapter the correspondence between the holy of holies and the garden of Eden. Suffice it to say here that the holy of holies derives its status from being the locale of God’s Presence on earth, and, so, from God’s nature as absolute life, the fountain of life—the God of the living. Understood in this manner, *the tabernacle’s grades of holiness are seen rather as grades of life*, with *the holy of holies representing fullness of life*. Not only does this point help to explain various requirements for the high priest, as well as to unfold the logic behind aspects of ceremonial uncleanness, but for our present purpose it also enables us to understand holiness legislation as an invitation to life with God: ‘You shall be holy because I YHWH your God am holy’ (Lev. 19:2; cf. Lev. 11:44–45; 20:7; cf. 1 Peter 1:16). The realm outside the gates of Eden is polluted with death; approaching God and communing with him must of necessity entail being set apart from sin and uncleanness (realm of death) to God himself, who is utterly holy (realm of life).

How the Day of Atonement relates to the theme of YHWH’s opening a way for humanity to dwell in the divine Presence is readily recognized when the significance of atonement is understood, namely *that it makes possible life in the divine Presence*. Atonement is reconciliation, at-one-ment. This is in keeping with Nihan’s basic theme for Leviticus as ‘Israel’s gradual initiation (by Yahweh himself) into the requirements of the divine Presence, an initiation taking place in three successive stages’ of growing intimacy. In bringing the divine Presence near, the book of Leviticus itself sharpens the focus of what may be called the central theological dilemma (and drama) of humanity’s relationship with God, namely the danger posed by intimacy with a ‘consuming fire’—a threat relieved *somewhat* by cultic legislation. At the heart of the Pentateuch, then, one finds humanity’s deepest penetration into the divine Presence—this by way of the cultic means opened by YHWH. As we will see, however, the book of Leviticus holds out the prospect of deeper communion with God, through the Day of Atonement, but also beyond it. That is, the Day of Atonement represents the deepest *cultic* penetration into God’s Presence, while chapters 17–27 of Leviticus will draw out the prospect of life with God enabled through the tabernacle cultus, as Israel grows steadily sanctified through its mediation.

Returning to the book’s outline, while academic dispute over the structure of Leviticus will probably continue, it is significant that a number of scholars, perhaps the widest consensus, accept Leviticus 16 as the literary and theological centre. A few who have posited Leviticus 19 as the centre of Leviticus nonetheless suggest that atonement appears thematically central to the book. Mary Douglas infers that atonement is the central theme of Leviticus, as does Moshe Kline, who believes the reader of Leviticus is placed in a position analogous to the high priest on the Day of Atonement, following the path of holiness through the courtyard, holy place and holy of holies to the centre of the book.35

Nihan has given a satisfactory critique of Douglas’s proposed structure, and I merely add that positioning the reader analogously to the high priest on the Day of Atonement is a more reasonable premise when the Day of Atonement itself is found to be the literary and thematic focus of the book.

Finally, turning our attention to the shape of Leviticus 16 itself, a number of scholars have posited a chiastic arrangement for this chapter. My own objective does not require being dogmatic on the form of Leviticus 16, as we are considering the thematic importance of the chapter (and Day of Atonement) as a whole. However, such a structure, if valid, serves to isolate Leviticus 16 as a textual unit, fits the central function of the chapter and further focuses attention upon the purpose of the ritual (vv. 16–17)—a salient point, given my suggested theme. Rodriguez argues for the following concentric outline, to which I have made slight alterations and have added the concentrically arranged Pentateuch:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| FRAME: ‘And YHWH said to Moses …’ (16:1) | |
|  | A. Aaron should not go into holy of holies any time he wishes (16:2)  B. Aaron’s sacrificial victims, special vestment (16:3–4)  C. Sacrificial victims provided by people (16:5)  D. Aaron’s bull, goat for sin-offering, goat for Azazel (16:6–10) |
| A. Genesis | E. Aaron sacrifices bull (16:11–14) |
| B. Exodus | F. Goat sacrificed as sin-offering (16:15) |
| X. Leviticus—ch. 16 → | X. Atonement (16:16–20a) |
| B.′ Numbers | F.′ Goat sent to wilderness (16:20b–22) |
| A.′ Deuteronomy | E.′ Aaron’s closing activities (16:23–25) |
|  | D.′ Goat for Azazel, Aaron’s bull, goat for sin-offering (16:26–28)  C.′ People rest and humble themselves (16:29–31)  B.′ Anointed priest officiates wearing special garments (16:32–33)  A.′ Anointed priest makes atonement once a year (16:34) |
| FRAME: ‘As YHWH commanded Moses …’ (16:34) | |

Notably, Luciani’s chiastic outline of the same chapter contains significant overlap, tending to confirm the general structure’s focus on the accomplished purgation of the tabernacle and camp of Israelites—‘so shall he make atonement …’ (v. 16):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 16:1–2a Narrative Speech Frame  I. 16:2aβ–10 | |
|  | A. YHWH’s address to Moses (2aβ–b)  B. Animals, clothes and bath to begin the ritual and penetrate into the holy of holies (3–5)  C. Presentation of the sacrificial animals and drawing of lots (6–10) |
| II. 16:11–20 | |
|  | X. Entrance, in 2 phases, into holy of holies with the blood of the *hatta’t* bull, with frankincense and with the blood of the *hatta’t* goat (11–15)  Y. The purpose of the ritual: Purge the holy of holies and the holy place of the impurities of the assembly of Israel (16–17)  X.′ Exit to the sacrificial altar and completion of cleansing the sanctuary (18–20) |
| III. 16:21–34a | |
|  | C.′ Load the sins of Israel onto scapegoat and drive it into the desert (21–22)  B.′ Procedures for ritual exit: disrobe, bath of the high priest and his assistants, burnt offerings, a provision of the remains of sacrificial materials (23–28)  A.′ YHWH addresses the Community (29–34) |
| 16:34b Narrative Speech Frame | |

At issue, once more, is the significance, thematic and theological, of this Day of Atonement chapter as a whole. Nihan, for example, who sees a threefold structure to the book of Leviticus (chs. 1–10, 11–16 and 17–26 [+27]), each section concluding with a reference to the divine Presence (chs. 9–10, 16, 26), notes the centrality of chapter 16, ‘undoubtedly the most important ritual in the whole book’, for the following reasons: (1) it is the annual occasion whereby both the sanctuary and the community are purified from all impurities, (2) it is the only ceremony whereby Aaron is given entrance into God’s Presence in the holy of holies, (3) formal devices, utterly unique and unparalleled so far in Leviticus, set off the chapter.

In basic agreement with Nihan’s proposal, I will approach the drama of Leviticus by a threefold movement, even as I highlight the significance of its central chapter.

While, certainly, not every detail of the Pentateuchal structures reviewed thus far is equally convincing, yet the structural centrality of the Sinai pericope (Schart’s outline), the framing of Leviticus (with Exodus and Numbers mirroring each other) and the theological centrality of the Day of Atonement within Leviticus are firm and widely held positions. Accepting the role of the Day of Atonement as the structural keystone and theological centre of Leviticus,42 it will, however, require the rest of this present study to affirm that *YHWH’s opening a way for humanity to dwell in the divine Presence*—particularly through atonement—is a theme that stretches throughout the horizon of the Pentateuch, its rays finding their source at its highest arc, the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16.

*A sacred journey to YHWH’s abode*

Finally, I supplement here my conclusions by an alternative angle of approach, which also enables me to map out the place of Leviticus within the Pentateuch. M. Smith persuasively demonstrates a symmetrical shaping of Exodus and Numbers by studying their geographical and temporal markers, long considered by commentators a staple of the priestly organization of Pentateuchal material. The itinerary notices in Exodus and Numbers balance one another with six notices charting the Israelites’ journey from Egypt to Rephidim, the station before Sinai (Exod. 12:37a; 13:20; 14:1–2; 15:22a; 16:1; 17:1) and six notices following the Israelites from Sinai to the plains of Moab in Numbers (Exod. 19:2; Num. 10:12; 20:1, 22; 21:10–11; 22:1), manifesting a correspondence between the journey to and from Sinai:

Exodus 1:1–15:21 in Egypt

15:22–18:26 in the wilderness

chs. 19–40 at Mount Sinai

Numbers 1:1–10:10 at Mount Sinai

10:11–21:35 in the wilderness

chs. 22–36 in Transjordan

The chronological markers are no less significant, marking special events according to Israel’s liturgical calendar. In the book of Exodus, for example, the chronological markers (12:2, 41; 19:1, 16; 40:17) ‘suggest a year arranged primarily according to the first two of three main pilgrimage feasts: Passover begins the series with the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites arrive at Sinai on the feast of Weeks, and the tabernacle (*miškān*) is completed around the New Year’. The same is true for the book of Numbers, so that Passover is celebrated not only to begin the journey to Sinai (Exod. 12–13) but to begin the journey from Sinai (Num. 9–10). Sacred time, Smith observes, is arranged chiastically around Leviticus: while Genesis 1 to Exodus 12 and Numbers 10 to Deuteronomy 34 are reckoned by years, Exodus 12 to Numbers 10 is counted by months, evoking the liturgical year through the feasts of Passover, Weeks and Booths.

Thus illustrating a deliberate concern with sacred space and time, Smith also notes throughout how the book of Leviticus itself contains neither itinerary notices nor chronological markers, that the book is, in a sense, timeless and spaceless and thus marked out as a separate book. Indeed, he stresses the central position of Leviticus in the Pentateuch, with the tabernacle being the centre of Israel’s holy and liturgical life. However, because it lacks chronological markers, Leviticus is left out of Smith’s examination.48 Still, Smith’s structuring categories of space and time are equally operative within the bounds of Leviticus, though of a different nature. The tabernacle plan structures the book in such a way that emphasis is placed upon both sacred space and time as they converge in ch. 16—the most sacred time, within the most sacred space. Smith’s argument that the Exodus to Numbers material has been shaped and structured according to the categories of sacred space and liturgical time, and this so as to stress the centrality of the book of Leviticus, I suggest, leads inevitably to the threshold of the veil—that is, to the Day of Atonement, the highest holy day of Israel’s calendar, the day of humanity’s nearest approach into the Presence of YHWH.

As we pan back once more beyond the Sinai narrative to the literary structure of the Pentateuch, particularly with the central Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers material in view, the following ‘geographic’ pattern is evident, providing a double frame around the tabernacle:

wilderness journey—Mt Sinai—tabernacle—Mt Sinai—wilderness journey

This sequence, then, is not merely linear, but has the tabernacle as the culminating centre. In ancient literature the literary centre is often thematically central, form following function—especially so within a chiastic structure. Yehudah Radday, for example, stated that the centre of a chiastic structure is

a key to meaning. Not paying sufficient attention to it may result in failure to grasp the true theme … Biblical authors and/or editors placed the main idea, the thesis, or the turning point of each literary unit, at its center … If true, the significance of this salient feature cannot be overestimated.

Thus reading an ancient work may be likened justly to traversing a mountain, with the two halves—the ascent and descent—mirroring each other, and the central summit constituting the literary height. Applying this insight to both the shape and content of the Pentateuch renders a reading along the lines of a journey to the abode of YHWH atop his holy mountain:

Like the psalmist’s journey to the abode of God in Psalm 23 (a pertinent analogy to which we will return later in this work) the Pentateuch is shaped as a journey led by YHWH to himself at Mount Sinai—and particularly to his abode, the tabernacle. As Blenkinsopp noted, the Pentateuch’s narratives ‘lead up to the moment when God has ordained to be indefectibly present to his people through its legitimate cult’. Keeping in mind that when reading ‘linearly’ one must be ever mindful that both halves of a work inform and are informed by the centre, focusing attention upon the centre and deriving meaning from it will help us to read the Pentateuch, as it were, with ‘cultic glasses’.

**Conclusion**

Like moving inwardly along the rings of a target, this chapter has surveyed the structure of the Pentateuch concentrically, moving from its fivefold arrangement to the inner books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, then to the Sinai narrative (Exod 19 to Num 10), then to the central book of Leviticus, and, finally, to the innermost ring itself, the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16—the narrowest aim of the Pentateuch’s formation. The shape of the Pentateuch, I posit, follows (and forms) its unifying theme: *YHWH’s opening a way for humanity to dwell in the divine Presence*. The essence of that *way* and the heart of the Pentateuch’s theology is the Day of Atonement.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. L. Michael Morales, [*Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?: A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*](https://ref.ly/logosres/nsbt37?ref=Page.p+31&off=1192&ctx=gislation+as+an+invi~tation+to+life+with+), ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 37, New Studies in Biblical Theology (England; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 2015), 31–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)