



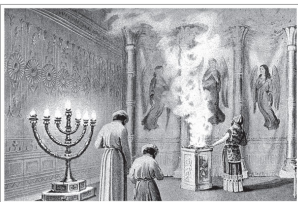
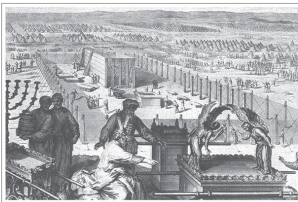
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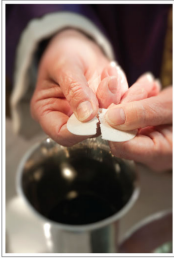


I. Introduction

Leviticus is a book about holiness. When you think about Leviticus, think holiness and you will be oriented to this part of the Law of God. It is important to appreciate the fact that the book of Exodus is not really self-contained. In other words, when you come to Exodus 40, you do not come to the end of something that leaves you with a complete sense of having finished a topic, and now moving on to something totally different; but rather, Leviticus is simply a continuation of Exodus. In some ways, these books are arbitrarily divided from one another because they really do go together as the books of Moses.

A. Holiness

But as we said, Leviticus emphasizes holiness. The laws found in Leviticus are all in one way or another about the topic of holiness. Here is the situation. The Israelites are still at Mt. Sinai. They have been there receiving the information that is contained in what we call Exodus, starting with Exodus 20; and now all through the book of Leviticus, they are still there. The book of Leviticus is a long series of laws that the Israelites received during the year that they spent at that mountain. They camped there for a solid year. They learned what God wanted them to do and be; they practiced doing his laws, particularly the ceremonies. They built the tabernacle during that time, which was a portable tent shrine at which they would worship ever after. They began using it to worship, and they ordained the various priests and consecrated them by special ceremonies. And in particular, they began to learn how to sacrifice to God.



B. Sacrifice

Sacrifice is not something that most of us are used to. We are not used to the idea that you worship by bringing the materials for a meal, including an animal, and preparing those materials into a meal, including killing an animal, and butchering it, and cooking it, and then eating that meal together. But in fact we do have, all of us who are Christians, a very important symbolic remnant of that in Communion. That is, we do not worship without eating either. In the full sequence of Christian worship, there is from time to time the taking of Communion, gathering at the Lord's Table and eating of the sacrifice. We don't actually eat of the body of Christ, but we do symbolically eat of the body of Christ. We take bread that symbolizes His body; and we take wine that symbolizes His blood. He says, "Eat of me," in Scripture. We know that having given us this ceremony, He is inviting us whenever we do it, to do it in remembrance of Him. He died for us, and symbolically we partake of His sacrifice.

II. The Five Offerings (1:1-7:38)

The Israelites had to learn how it was that they worshiped God. One of the key features was the sacrifices. The early chapters of the book of Leviticus are about those sacrifices. That is what you find in chapters 1-7.

A. Whole Burnt Offering

There is the burnt offering sacrifice that describes how you take the animal and, with minimal preparation, place it upon an altar and burn it up totally, sort of cremates the animal. The purpose of this was to symbolize giving to God what belongs to Him. That was not the only way that animals were sacrificed.

There were also sacrifices, the more common kind, in which the animal was actually cooked: a small portion of it being burnt on the altar as a symbolic gift to God, sort of the smoke carrying the offering to God in a symbolic way. Then most parts of the animal were shared in eating. A portion went to the priests and Levites, who ate theirs, and the rest of it would go to the worshiper. You and your

family would sit down around the tabernacle, later around the temple that Solomon built, and you would eat the covenant meal; because it was understood that every time you ate in worship, you were reminding yourself that you belonged to God, and that you were related to Him through His covenant. That is why Jesus in the New Testament can say that this is the New Covenant in my blood when He talks about drinking the wine of Communion.

B. Grain Offering

There were other types of offerings. One category was the grain offering, because in fact, these meals sacrificed to God and then shared by priests and worshipers were balanced meals—they were not just meat. They consisted of all kinds of ingredients that we would typically think of as constituting a meal, and they are described in the early chapters of Leviticus.

C. Fellowship Offering

There is also a type of offering called a fellowship offering. You do not have to offer that because you are in big trouble or because you have obviously or unconsciously sinned against God. It is just an offering that indicates you remain in fellowship with Him. That is the way it is with Communion. We do not take Communion more frequently because we have sinned more. Communion is a fellowship meal, along with all the other categories and overtones that it has.

D. Sin Offering

There was, however, an actual sin offering. The sin offering was specifically offered when a person had sinned, and was aware of it. It's design was to provide atonement for sin. Something dies so that you do not have to, because the ultimate penalty for sin is always death. There may have been lesser penalties for lesser types of sins, but ultimately the sinner deserves to die; that is the way God has structured things. The sinner does not deserve eternal life in the presence of God. A substitution is made by which something else dies for the sinner, and the sinner can keep living; not only can the sinner live in this life, but also in the life to come as we eventually learn much better



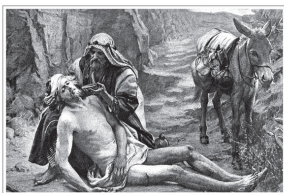
Psalm 51:3-4

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned.



AARON

the high priest from
the tribe of Levi



and more clearly in the New Testament. The sin offering is what an ancient Israelite would offer when he or she came with a sense of guilt, needing forgiveness, and seeking to be restored to God's favor and fellowship.

E. Guilt Offering

There was also a guilt offering. This is very similar to the sin offering, but it was yet another means of focusing upon God's forgiveness, another way, another angle of coming at what the sacrifices ultimately were designed to do; that is, to get people right with God and bring them closer to Him.

In chapters 1-5, the basic types of offerings are mentioned—the burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering. Then in chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Leviticus, these five offerings are gone through again, both as a summary and also with some additional minor details about how they are to be handled from the point of view of the priests.

III. Priestly Holiness (8:1-17:16)

This brings us to the topic of the priests. The first part of the book of Leviticus is about priests. You can think of the book, chapters 1 through 17, as having the category of priestly holiness because God called His whole nation to be a kingdom of priests. The Israelites as a group were a priesthood. When Martin Luther speaks about the "priesthood of all believers," he does not mean the priesthood of each individual believer as his own priest; he is just referring to the Old Testament concept that all the believers together are God's priests.

A. Beginning of the Priesthood (8:1-10:20)

But then here were, in particular, actual individuals from the tribe of Levi and members in that tribe, descended from Aaron, who were to serve as priests, intermediaries between God and the people, who helped with the rituals, who helped to be sure that the people understood the Law, and to help interpret holiness for those who had questions about what it was and how it was to be manifested. In



chapters 8-10 of Leviticus, we find all sorts of instructions about the beginning of the priesthood: how priests were to be ordained, how they were to be consecrated, the limitation of the priesthood (just to those who were descended from Aaron), and so on.

B. Cleanness and Uncleanness (11:1-17:16)

After chapter 10 there is a section of material that finishes off the first part of the book in chapters 11-17. It is all about cleanness and uncleanness; cleanness as referring to the types of animals one could eat; cleanness as referring to what constituted one worthy for worship if one were an ancient Israelite; cleanness as referring to how to get clean if one was unclean; what kinds of things made you unclean.

What we learn from these things help us a lot with New Testament stories and issues. For example, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan and describes how a priest and a Levite pass by on the other side of the road, not stopping to help the man who had been attacked and left for dead by robbers, because they are nervous about the possibility of becoming unclean.

Contact with a dead body was one way of becoming unclean. If anyone had gone to check that body to see if it was alive and it was not, just touching a dead body would make them unclean. Of course, they were not justified in what they did by the Law. Their problem was that they were putting their need to be ritually clean so as to participate in certain worship practices above the life of a human. That is certainly backwards. But at least it gives you a sense of how they might have viewed their situation and how they might have rationalized their decision not to help.

Why is cleanness and uncleanness so important though? What is the big issue? Why did God spend all those chapters getting His people to think in terms of clean food, clean action, clean clothing, clean processes, and likewise unclean things. It is because cleanliness is a very important and a useful metaphor for holiness. What God wants for His people is for them to be holy.

Leviticus 18:5

*Keep my decrees and laws,
for the man who obeys
them will live by them.
I am the Lord.*



C. Be Holy

We benefit from the emphasis upon being holy. It is not being physically clean that is our issue; it is not that you have to have washed your clothes before you go to church. But what we can see from examining these laws, even though they are not commandments for us, they certainly are inspired knowledge that we can benefit from. We can see how important it was for God to teach His people how to be pure, how to care about being pure, how to be concerned that they measure up to His standards, how to take seriously the fact that His standards are very high, that they could not meet them in and of themselves. They needed even purification rituals to become pure.

IV. How to Be a Holy Nation (18:1-27:34)

For Christians, baptism corresponds to some of these rituals. Baptism is a way of symbolizing that we are pure, that our sins are washed away in Christ. The second half of the book of Leviticus is about how to be a holy nation. We find that in the material from the beginning of chapter 18 to the end of chapter 27 where the book ends. This is the part of the book that most Christians more easily identify with. The laws here are a little bit less related to ritual and a little more related to what we might just call holy living, especially living in community; living as a holy people, relating to one another in a holy way.

A. Poor and Aliens

To give you an example of one of the laws from Leviticus 19: "Do not turn to idols or make gods of cast metal for yourselves. I am the Lord your God." That is very similar to what we find in the Ten Commandments, indicating that idolatry corrupts a person. Or, how about this law, again from Leviticus 19: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God." There is a law that says a pure people, a holy people, a holy nation, must be made up of somewhat sloppy farmers. By that we mean that you do not really do a spick and span job of harvesting because there are poor people. There



are those who do not have any land themselves. There are those who may have been too sick during the harvest to farm their own land and need to gather something for themselves for the winter. There are the resident aliens who have come into the nation but do not yet own a plot of land. These people God cares about, and so should you if you are a righteous Israelite. And so you actually do a sloppy job of gathering up your grain, of picking your figs or your grapes; you leave the stuff on the ground that fell there. As you have cut down the stalks of grain, you do not go to the very edge. You let them come in and you let them get for themselves whatever they can pick up or glean; that is, do the second kind of run through the harvest. This is a way of showing your love and kindness for them because you belong to God and are His holy people.

B. Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

One of the most important laws related to holiness is of course Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This is a law to keep for a lifetime; it is a challenge for anybody, in terms of holiness, to actually love your neighbor as yourself. Some people have tried to argue that this means that proper love for others has to start with self-love. But it does not say that. The Bible never urges us to self-love. It just says in an elliptical fashion, a kind of abbreviated fashion, love others as you would have them love you. Jesus said the two greatest commandments in the Old Testament were to love your neighbor as yourself from the human point of view and to love God with your whole heart.

In the ancient world, and particularly in the Hebrew language, the word “love” does not refer only to emotion. It is not a matter of feeling, so that you feel love for someone all that much; it is a matter of action that you take. We have letters from ancient kings, one to another, saying, “King so and so no longer loves me. He used to love me, but now he hates me. He now loves king such and such.” By that they do not mean that they had romantic relationships one with another. They are using love in the sense of being allied with, being responsive to, caring about, doing acts of love for. In other words, the language of love was even used in diplomacy to speak of alliances, friendships, and relationships. That is the way that God uses love in a book

Leviticus 19:18

Love your neighbor as yourself.



Who is My Neighbor?

Leviticus 19:16

Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the Lord.

Blessings & Curses

like Leviticus. “Love your neighbor as yourself” is not a question of primarily how you feel about your neighbor, what your emotional response might be to him or her; it is a question of how you treat your neighbor. Are you a friend to your neighbor? Are you an ally to your neighbor? Are you a person who does caring things for your neighbor?

Now of course, who is your neighbor? Really, that question is answered simply by the language of the Old Testament—it is any fellow citizen. It is even the non-citizen, the resident alien who is your neighbor. It is the other person who you are in contact with. Jesus specifies that in His wonderful parable about the Good Samaritan when a legalist tries to challenge Him on the point. The neighbor is a complete stranger, perhaps, who needs your help. That is what the parable tells us.

C. Slander

Here is another law from Leviticus 19: “Do not go about spreading slander among your people.” God’s holy people have to be careful about the way they speak to one another and about one another. Slander hurts. False criticism of people is powerful and this comports with teachings in the New Testament in several places, notably the book of James, about how harmful an influence can come from just the use of one’s tongue in one’s mouth.

D. Blessings and Curses (26:3-39)

There are also a number of blessings and curses in this part of the book. The next to last chapter, Leviticus 26, contains in it what we would call the sanctions of the Sinai covenant. If you start back with Exodus 20 with the laws, the stipulations, they go right past the end of Exodus and on into Leviticus and right through chapter 26, where then come the blessings and curses of the covenant. So Exodus and Leviticus are united in that way as one section of material, the covenant law that the Israelites received on Mt. Sinai. Toward the end of that year that the Israelites were there at Mt. Sinai, they received then from God, through Moses, blessings and curses. One might call these the carrot and the stick of God’s covenant. The blessings are the descriptions of the wonderful things that He will do for His people if they will only be faithful to Him. He reminds

Leviticus 26:3-4

If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit.

Leviticus 26:14-16

But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life.

them that this is part of His covenant in the beginning of chapter 26 of Leviticus, which says, “Do not make idols or set up an image and so on, and worship them. I am the Lord your God. Observe my Sabbaths . . .”

And then He says, “If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting.” It is a way of saying, “You will have abundance of food. I will bless you. I will take care of you. I will give you the things you need.” It is a lot like Jesus’ statement, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you.” He also says, “I will grant you peace in the land.” He says, “I will remove savage beasts from the land.” —protections of all kinds and benefits. He says, “I will look on you with favor, and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you.”

But there is also the other side of the coin. If they disobey, God will be faithful to His promises; and His promises are that He will not allow people who enter into covenant with Him and who promised Him that they are His people to act like they are not His people. He is not going to allow people who are called to be pure to be impure. He is not going to let people who are called to be righteous flaunt their unrighteousness before Him. He says, “If you will not listen to me, if you do not carry out all these commands, if you reject my decrees, then I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases, fever . . . you will plant seed in vain because your enemies will eat it . . . I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies, and those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you.” In other words, God would cause His people to be in big trouble with their enemies. He caused them to have trouble in terms of their agricultural prosperity, even send psychological terrors among them, and so on.

The blessing is held before them like the carrot before the horse. But there is also the stick as a prod: remember the dangers, the harms, the unpleasant activities that they will experience if they do not trust Him and do His will. The

REDEMPTION is buying back.

book of Leviticus then ends on that kind of note. It ends with a word, however, that gives some encouragement to the reader. It can seem after you have read the curses that it is kind of a downer ending to a book, but then you come to chapter 27 with one particular prescription, and that is about redemption.

V. Conclusion: Redemption

Redemption is buying back. God describes for the Israelites how to do that as a symbol of what we know finally as Christ's buying us back. Everything belongs to God—the first born of every human, every animal. But God does not actually want people to bring their children and leave them off at the tabernacle. He says, “You bring them, you dedicate them, but then you pay a small payment and you buy them back.” Thus, He taught every Israelite in every generation the principle of buying back what was precious to them. Now, Jesus did that. He bought us back from the penalty that we would be under in sin. He paid a tremendous price and thereby shows us how precious we were to Him. The book of Leviticus ends with that theme that leads us so well into the New Testament, the theme of redemption, buying back.