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# How to Read Leviticus



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# 1

## To Read or Not to Read?

In many quarters Leviticus has a seriously poor reputation. Those who decide to read the Bible right through often come to grief at this point. What is the relevance of a book full of the minutiae of an ancient system of worship that disappeared thousands of years ago? We prefer stories, of which Leviticus has few. Instead it has a great number of laws, many of which are repetitive and describe rituals we have never experienced (and often never want to!), such as sacrifice. Nor are we given many explanations of why something is to be done; when a reason is given, it is often baffling (what on earth does 'atone' really mean?). Furthermore, has not Christ fulfilled these laws and brought them to an end? Does not his once-for-all sacrifice make the complex system of sacrifices in Leviticus irrelevant? When Jesus declares all foods clean (Mark 7.19), do we need any longer to pay attention to the complex distinctions between clean and unclean animals found in Leviticus 11? Leviticus is also the notorious book where homosexual activity is condemned. Do we still need to bother with this obsolete, obscure and objectionable text?

**In recent years there has been a growing fascination with Leviticus and the strange world it portrays**

Yet in recent years there has been a growing fascination with Leviticus and the strange world it portrays. The scholarly literature has expanded exponentially, and the book has inspired select readers at a more popular level. Rob Bell began his ministry in Grand Rapids, Michigan, by preaching through Leviticus verse by verse.<sup>1</sup> Its visual character and (literally) flesh and blood substance gripped his congregation, and began to bring to life in a fresh way the work of Christ. Getting to grips with all the detail can indeed be hard work, but we should be wary of succumbing to a culture that wants everything to be easy and entertaining. It is hard work for a medical student to master the details of human anatomy, but we would be worried if our surgeon had decided not to bother. In a similar way (I shall argue) the laws of Leviticus can give us a rich and in-depth awareness of how God interacts with human beings. This at least is what I have found in my own journey of studying Leviticus. I have discovered insights that have surprised me by their relevance and practicality. In particular, Leviticus has helped me know more profoundly what it is to worship God, and how people can be helped to encounter the holy and living God today.

The overt setting of Leviticus is God's revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai. Here Moses receives the Ten Commandments (Exod 20.2–17) and more detailed guidance on how Israel is to order its life (Exod 21–23). But Exodus 25 marks the start of a long series of laws about holiness that only end at Numbers 10.11, when the Israelites set out from Sinai and continue their journey to the promised land. This whole block (with the exception of Exod 32–34) reflects interests characteristic of priests, so scholars often identify this material as being transmitted by a priestly circle or tradition (for which the letter P is used as a shorthand).

It is likely that the text we have now is the result of a lengthy process of development and refining. Indeed, the continuous story of Genesis to 2 Kings suggests that the Babylonian exile may have been the setting for the final editing of P. At the same time, Leviticus is based on earlier sources, and in its present form invites us to see it as an authentic expression of how the God of the Exodus and Sinai seeks to dwell in the midst of his people. The long history of transmission suggests that what we have here is no primitive record of magical or superstitious rituals, but a well-developed and subtle theology of worship.

## **The Purpose of Leviticus**

However Leviticus came to its present form, the most important question is what it says about God. Protestants have sometimes been suspicious of these texts, because they imply an approach to God that is rigid and obsessed with detail. But this is not necessarily the case. An architect can only fulfil a commission by attending both to the building's purpose and to the detailed specifications that enable this to happen. The goal of the Priestly tradition is to enable God to dwell with his people (Exod 25.8–9). But this requires a detailed guide as to the where, who, what and why of worship, for it will encompass all of Israel's complex life. In fact, anyone who has led worship knows how many details need to be sorted out, and the unhelpful chaos that results from not attending to them. Leviticus is a worked example of how worship might take place in a particular time and context. It is not meant to be copied rigidly, but interpreted with an awareness of the underlying principles of worship. Leviticus' exilic editors were well aware that the Tabernacle was not the same as the Temple—and in any case the Temple had now been destroyed. Its portrait of worship was meant to be a flexible guide and inspiration for later readers, whether in theory (for example the radical vision of Ezek 40–48) or in practice (the Temple that Jesus knew).

The sheer extent of these priestly laws implies that they are foundational as well as exemplary. The underlying principles will continue to inform all later worship, whether in a Temple or a church. Walter Brueggemann has argued

that law and narrative are the two foundational genres that shape the identity of any community.<sup>2</sup> We are not meant to prefer one to the other, but to see the vital links between the two. The Exodus is the foundation for Israel's existence and identity as the Lord's covenant community. But without the laws of Sinai, the Israelites would not know how to live with each other or with God, and the community would be in danger of worshipping an idol (one lesson of Exod 32–34). We can see a similar complementary pattern in the New Testament. The gospels and Acts are the founding narratives of the Christian faith, but the epistles are essential in showing how the churches are meant to behave in the light of the story of Christ crucified and risen. We can see the contrast with places such as Somalia, where the lack of law and order has brought about the collapse of community, resulting in untold suffering.

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Narrative is linked to law in all kinds of ways. The goal and climax of the Exodus is explicitly said to be worship on the mountain (Exod 4.23; 7.16). Salvation is only complete when the covenant people receive the gift of the law, which instructs them what that salvation means in practice. "The book of Leviticus deals with the "ever after" phase of a relationship. It is about routine tasks, such as maintaining the house (the sanctuary) and doing the laundry (purification laws)."<sup>3</sup> The end of Exodus prepares for this ongoing relationship of worship by describing the Tabernacle, which is first commanded (Exod 25–31) and then constructed (Exod 35–40). It is within the Tabernacle that the sacrifices of Lev 1–7 are offered, the priests ordained (Lev 8–10), and major impurities are purified (Lev 11–15 discusses impurity in general). The first half of the book comes to a climax with the great ritual of the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). The second half (Lev 17–27) broadens out into laws about the family, the community and the land, although much of this is related directly or indirectly to worship. In this booklet there is no space to cover all the chapters. Instead I shall introduce a number of key ideas that will help a reader grasp the significance underlying the detail.

# 2

## Holiness

The Jewish scholar Jacob Milgrom suggested that ‘the theme of the entire book of Leviticus is holiness,’ so we turn first to this central concept.<sup>4</sup> Holiness is one of the great theological words. It appears more often in the Bible than is obvious in English translation, because several English words are used for the relevant adjective/noun (holy, sacred) and verb (become or make holy, sanctify, consecrate). Most of our terms for God are derived from the human or natural realm (such as king, shepherd, faithful), but holiness characterizes the essential ‘godness’ of God. People and objects can be holy, but only after

### **Holiness is simply that which belongs to God in a special way**

God has made them holy by a specific act of consecration. It is not an innate feature of the created world, and even the Sabbath (Gen 2.1–3) is hidden until revealed to Israel in Exod 16. Nor is holiness normally a

dramatic experience of the ‘wholly other,’ although this might happen at key points (Lev 9.23–24). The laws of Leviticus respect the dangerous nature of holiness, but regulate how it is worked out in normal life. Holiness is perhaps best understood as simply that which belongs to God in a special way. What this implies will depend on the context and whether it is a place, a person, an action or a time that is holy.<sup>5</sup>

### **General Holiness**

In Leviticus it is possible to identify two distinct kinds of holiness. The first, which I call general holiness, characterizes the covenant people as a whole. When the people of Israel arrive at Sinai to make a covenant, they are identified as ‘a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.’ The chosen people belong to the Lord in a way that distinguishes them from all other nations (Exod 19.5–6). It is this theme that is taken up in the second half of Leviticus, such as when the people are commanded ‘be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy’ (Lev 19.2). Israel’s distinctiveness is to be worked out in every area of life, represented by the remarkable variety of laws that follow this declaration. The holiness of all of God’s people is the primary emphasis of the New Testament. Paul, for example, calls the Corinthian church as a whole, ‘sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints’ (1 Cor 1.2). The rest of the letter makes it very clear that this is not a description of their moral perfection, and certainly not that they are exempt from judgment. Rather, it highlights that they have been baptized into

Jesus Christ and now belong to him in a special way (1 Cor 10). This general holiness remains the fundamental and most important aspect. General holiness emphasizes God's committed and exclusive relationship to his people as a whole, whoever they are.

## Graded Holiness

Yet at the end of Exodus and in the first half of Leviticus we find a second kind of holiness, which I call specific or graded holiness.<sup>6</sup> Within Israel itself some spaces and some Israelites are holy in ways that others are not. This kind of graded holiness can be seen most clearly in the architecture and symbolism of the Tabernacle.

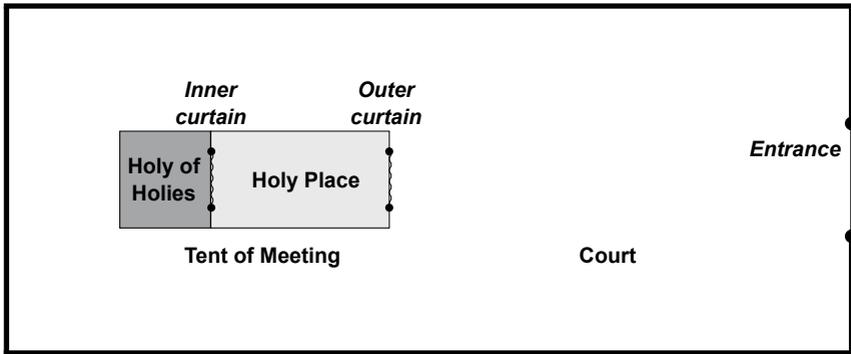


Diagram of the Tabernacle showing **zones** and **boundaries**

In the centre of the Tabernacle is a small cubic room that is called the Holy of Holies (Exod 26.33). This is a Hebrew way to indicate a superlative, 'most holy' (just as 'the Song of Songs' is 'the most excellent Song'). This is where God's holiness is most intense, and where he appears most fully (Lev 10.2). The Holy of Holies is separated by a curtain (usually translated as 'the veil') from another room, which is often called simply the 'Holy Place.' This area is again protected by another curtain from the main court of the Tabernacle, parts of which are holy but others merely clean. The materials of construction reinforce this idea of graded holiness by symbolically representing God's presence. For example, the nearer the Holy of Holies, the more pure gold and specially woven materials there are.

This spatial marking of graded holiness correlates with the personal dimension. The nearer the centre, the more restricted are those who can enter, and then at special times and in special ways. Lay people as well as priests can worship in the courtyard. The Holy Place can be entered more regularly, but only by authorized priests with great care. Only the high priest can enter the

most holy place, and that just once a year on the Day of Atonement while protected by clouds of incense (Lev 16.12–13).

This idea of graded holiness frequently appears in formal worship. Priests are ordained who have special responsibilities in worship that lay people do not. Some spaces are consecrated to God, such as churches and cathedrals. Within these are sometimes smaller areas of greater holiness that are even today protected by barriers and prohibitions (as with the high altar). In our postmodern and (supposedly) democratic culture we may be suspicious of

**Graded holiness allows us to draw closer to God, but never completely erase the distinction**

such ideas of differentiation, hierarchy and grading. However, underlying the whole system is a recognition that God is of a different order from us. He is incomparable in holiness and greatness. God remains transcendent and far above

and beyond anything we can know or imagine. 'It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see' (1 Tim 6.16). The system of graded holiness allows us to safeguard God's absolute holiness, while at the same approaching him to the degree that we are able. We can draw closer to him, but never completely erase the distinction between the creator and his creation. This truth stands hand in hand with the complementary truth that God has entered into this world and become Immanuel, God with us, in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

This double truth is to be found on the human level as well. The Queen is first of all a human being, but she is also someone special. This aspect is protected and communicated by the numerous barriers (physical and social) before someone can get to meet her. This is all the more true about God. A temple is a god's palace (temple and palace are the same word in Hebrew), and a sanctuary is often called 'the house of God' (Ezra 1.4). The Tabernacle is the Lord's dwelling place (Exod 25.8), and the laws preventing easy access were spatial and symbolic markers of his supreme holiness and sovereignty. A frequent complaint about contemporary worship is that it has lost sight of the holiness and transcendence of God. It is impossible to make such a complaint about the worship presented to us in Leviticus.

To sum up, we can find two different ideas of holiness in Leviticus. Some scholars have attributed these to quite different sources. Graded holiness is characteristic of a priestly tradition (P), while general holiness is the emphasis of a related but distinct tradition (called H). Recently some have understood H to represent a later tradition, concerned to correct narrower, older ideas of holiness.<sup>8</sup> Yet the two perspectives are juxtaposed in Leviticus, and in the final form of the text it is better to regard them as complementary and contextual. If we are talking about the whole people of God, then it is a matter of general

holiness. If it is about distinctions within Israel (priests *vs* non-priests, the Tabernacle *vs* the camp), then we are in the world of graded holiness. Both reflect important truths about God, who is both transcendent (emphasized by specific, graded holiness) and immanent (emphasized by general holiness). We shall see how these distinctions also help us make sense of the laws of sacrifice and purity.

# 3

## Sacrifice

Many have attempted to discover the essential meaning of sacrifice. An older theory was that sacrifice was originally intended to provide food for the gods (see Lev 3.11). The literal outworking of this idea is satirized in the story of Bel and the Dragon (Additions to the Book of Daniel, in the Apocrypha). Another theory is that it was meant to be a commercial exchange: I give a sacrifice to a god, and in return the god blesses and rewards. We might compare church leaders who promise prosperity in return for donations to their ministry. But God always retains his sovereign freedom, and this theory is mocked in Psalm 50.7–11. In the evangelical tradition attention is often focused on the idea that the death of the animal substituted for the offerer, whose sins deserved death.

### **Sacrifice is a ritual language that enables worshippers to do many different things**

Yet others emphasize the way that sacrifice enabled communion between the god and his worshippers.

The difficulty is that sacrifice is not one thing. Rather, it is a ritual language that enables worshippers to do many different things.

Attempting to pin down the essence of sacrifice is as difficult as finding the essence of a meal: is it meant to fuel our bodies, establish a family identity, find a partner or win a competition? And what is a meal anyway? Must it have a meat course, be eaten sitting down, and include at least two people? The nature of a meal depends on context, and the same event can achieve different purposes simultaneously. The same is true of sacrifice. The particular form of a sacrificial ritual depended on what it was meant to do, although we can set out a standard pattern. Typically a sacrifice had six stages, including actions both by the offerer and the priest. A person brought an animal to the sanctuary, laid a hand on it, and then slaughtered and cleaned it. The priest dealt with the blood and other parts, burnt the animal (or a part of it), and disposed of the remains. Different sacrifices tended to highlight one or other of these stages.

### **Sacrifice in Leviticus 1–7**

In Leviticus 1–7 there are two main kinds of sacrifice. The first is illustrated by the Sin/Purification Offering, which emphasized the role of the blood, which was necessary for atonement (see Lev 4.20). It dealt with the problems

that arose from sin and impurity, and was therefore a corrective or restorative ritual. We might understand it as equivalent to the confession of sins, although, since a sacrifice cost a great deal, it was perhaps more like an act of penitence. If someone had been defrauded, then the Guilt/Reparation Offering required, in addition, the restoration of the money, along with substantial interest (Lev 6.5; see Zacchaeus in Luke 19.8). The material and moral cost of these sacrifices ensures that they are more than an abstract, mental statement. Indeed, one of the lessons of sacrifice is to suggest renewed attention to the material and bodily character of worship. The prophets are true to the spirit of the laws of sacrifice in requiring justice from worshippers (Isa 1.10–17; Mal 1–2; see also Matt 23; Jas 2).

These sacrifices were obligatory: sin or major impurity required atonement. The second main kind of sacrifice was voluntary. There were many different kinds of Peace Offering (*shelamim*), where the blood aspect faded into the background (it is never said to atone). Instead, the main result was a meat meal for the offerer, along with family and friends (Lev 7.15–16). Indeed, this might be the only time in the year when an ordinary family could afford to eat meat and so was an opportunity for celebration and sharing all round. Some of the sacrifice was dedicated to the Lord, while other parts were given to the priests. This sacrifice was therefore positive, highlighting God's gracious gift of life and joy to family and community.

## **Sacrifice in Leviticus 8**

A third kind of sacrifice comes to the fore in Leviticus 8. The consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests is an example of what anthropologists call a rite of passage. The ritual took them on a journey that began with the participants having one status (ordinary Israelites) and ended with their having a different one (holy priests). We may compare baptism or coming of age ceremonies. The sacrifices included a ram for the Ordination Offering, which was eaten (Lev 8.18, 31). It was therefore a kind of Peace Offering, but one that marked the transition that the participants were undergoing. We can compare the blood of the covenant with which Moses sprinkled the people on Mount Sinai (Exod 24.8). The ordination of priests and bishops today similarly includes unique and dramatic rituals that convey a change in status and role.

## **The Burnt Offering**

Into which category does the Burnt Offering fit? The usual explanation is that it atoned, as stated in Leviticus 1.4, but this is rarely, if ever, highlighted elsewhere. The distinctive feature of this sacrifice was that the whole animal was burnt, so that it belonged totally to the Lord as 'an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the Lord' (Lev 1.9). I like to think of it as first of all an

offering of pure praise, without reference to any benefit that the offerer might receive. It is fitting that it comes first of importance in the list of sacrifices. But it required the shedding of blood, and this may have inspired its association with atonement. All sacrifices had common features and so a significant overlap of meaning is possible. In a similar way we can interpret the meaning of the death of Christ using different images and models (as sacrifice, as ransom, as victory), but certain aspects will overlap. Every approach to Christ's death affirms that Christ's death was central in dealing with the problem of the human condition. In a sacrifice the offerer was always intimately identified with the animal, indicated by the instruction for the offerer to put one hand on the animal.

## Rituals and Variations

Actual rituals usually included two or more sacrifices. In Leviticus 1–7 the order in which they are mentioned is probably in order of importance, and this is different from the order in which they are offered (see Num 6.16–17). First, the Sin/Purification Offering removed the faults that had disturbed the relationship between the offerer and the LORD. Then came the Burnt Offerings, which celebrated who God is. Finally, the restored relationship was celebrated by the peace offerings or their equivalent. We may compare a church service, which might include praise, confession, the sharing of peace, and a common meal (the Eucharist). In this way our complex needs and desires are satisfied and ordered before the Lord of glory, who forgives and incorporates us in his people through the sacrifice of his Son.

Within each of the main types of sacrifice there were several variations. For the Burnt Offerings (Lev 1), a bull was more costly and indicated a greater offering than a sheep or goat, while a poor person might only be able to afford a bird (Lev 14.22; see the offering of Jesus' parents in Luke 2.24). If a priest or the whole congregation committed an offence, a costly bull was required for a Sin/Purification Offering, but a less costly animal was allowed for a ruler or an ordinary person (Lev 4). But before we discuss these matters further, it is necessary to explore a further central concept in Leviticus, that of purity and impurity.

# 4

## Purity and Impurity

The laws of purity and impurity in Leviticus 11–15 are perhaps the most difficult and baffling section of Leviticus.<sup>9</sup> As with holiness, it is helpful to realize that several different English words translate the same Hebrew noun/ adjective (clean/pure; unclean/impure/polluted) and verb (cleanse/purify; defile/pollute). Because the purity system plays little role in our lives, it is easy to underestimate its significance; in fact, it is essential for a proper understanding of the priestly conception of holiness, sacrifice and much else. A primary role of the priests is, 'You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean' (Lev 10.10). 'Common' (sometimes translated 'profane') is a general term for the non-holy, which includes both the clean and the unclean. Above all the holy has to be kept apart from the unclean, for the unclean represents what God is not. 'Clean,' on the other hand, is a neutral term. To be clean is a stepping-stone either towards the holy (through consecration) or the unclean (through defilement). Becoming unclean is often just part of ordinary life, but deliberately bringing the unclean into contact with the holy is a serious sin, for it shows contempt for the holy God. This is why working on the holy Sabbath (Exod 31.14), or misusing the holy name of the Lord (Lev 19.12) attracted the heaviest punishment (death or being cut off from the people).

### What is Impurity?

What, though, is impurity? Older theorists suggested that impurity indicated a medical danger and that the laws of impurity were hygienic precautions, but there is little evidence for this. Another theory was that impurity was originally a demonic power that attacked the sanctuary. But again the texts do not view this as a serious concern. Suggestions that the laws were arbitrary tests of obedience satisfied few. Yet another view is that uncleanness is the same as sinfulness (Psa 51). But while sin leads to impurity, so that impurity often becomes a powerful metaphor for sin, it is not the case that all impurity is due to sin. For example, childbirth is never regarded as inherently sinful either in Leviticus or the rest of the Bible (Lev 12).

So let us instead first distinguish two grades of impurity. Examples of major impurity are the status of a woman giving birth (for the first week or two, Lev 12), a person with a skin disease (Lev 13) and someone with a genital

discharge (Lev 15). This kind of impurity made others impure in various ways (it is 'contagious'), lasts seven days, and has to be purified by a sacrifice. Minor impurity is the status of a man who discharges semen or a menstruant. It also characterizes anyone who has contact with a menstruant (Lev 15.19–24, 16–18), touches a carcass (Lev 11.24–40), or has contact with a major impurity (Lev 15). Except for the menstruant, minor impurity lasts only a day and is cleansed by waiting and washing. Certain animals were also unclean (Lev 11).

My own view is that, to make sense of all this, we need to start from the fundamental opposition between impurity and holiness. This contrast represents fundamental differences between the nature of the holy God and the nature of human beings, especially when they are unclean. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this distinction is bound up with a cluster of opposites, including life/death, order/disorder, unchangeable/changeable, asexual/sexual, and whole/blemished. The level of impurity corresponds in part to the degree of contrast.

### **Impurity and holiness represent fundamental differences between God and human beings**

It is surely significant that the most potent form of impurity was that of a human corpse, which (uniquely) made impure any who come into contact for seven days and required an extraordinary purification

(Num 19). Death is at the opposite pole to the living God, who is the source of all life. The 'death' theme is also reflected by the way in which a number of the unclean birds are carrion eaters or predators (Lev 11.13–19). Someone or something with skin disease (Lev 13–14—this does not refer to the disease we now call leprosy) had an appearance similar to that of a dead person (Num 12.12). There are several possible explanations for the major impurity of a woman giving birth (Lev 12). It may be related to the changeability and temporality of human life, which ultimately results in death. Birth is also a preminent mark of sexuality, whereas the holy God of Israel is neither male nor female. In the ancient world there were male and female gods who gave birth, and who could die. The impurity laws comprise a symbol system that highlights the Lord's transcendent and eternal character. Human beings cannot avoid impurity, for they are mortal, sexually differentiated and thereby of a different order of being to the divine. There is nothing inherently sinful or inappropriate about being impure, but in order to approach the sanctuary worshippers are required to be clean, when their nature as mortal and sexual beings is not in the foreground.

### **The Relationship Between Sin and Impurity**

How does Leviticus understand the complex relationship between sin and impurity? Not all impurity derives from sin. But in Leviticus' symbolic sys-

tem someone who sins not only becomes impure, but also compromises the integrity of the sanctuary. This is why in Leviticus 4 and 5 certain sins have to be dealt with by a sacrifice that includes the purification of the sanctuary. The traditional translation of the sacrifice used in these cases is 'Sin Offering.' But because sin is not necessarily the cause of the impurity (as argued above), I am in sympathy with those consider its primary character as a Purification Offering. From this perspective the atoning sacrifices were primarily concerned with purifying both the impure person and the sanctuary through the blood of the sacrifice. In the priestly system, blood is a more powerful agent of purification than water, which can only deal with minor impurity. Blood is clearly a metaphorical rather than a literal cleansing agent, and its power relates to the general logic and assumed reality of the entire system of sacrifice and purification.

Leviticus 4 describes several different sacrifices. The two main variables are the kind of animal that needs to be sacrificed, and how the blood is treated. If a leader or ordinary person is at fault, then the blood of a goat or sheep is put on the four raised corners ('the horns') of the Altar of Burnt Offering, which is in the courtyard of the Tabernacle (verses 22–35). But if it is an anointed priest or the congregation as a whole who has sinned, then the blood of a bull is brought into the outer part of the Tent of Meeting, the Holy Place. It is put on the four corners of the Incense Altar that resides there, but it also sprinkled seven times in front of the curtain that separates the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies (verses 3–21). The underlying principle is that the more significant the offender, the more serious the sin, and correspondingly the more powerful must be the atoning ritual. The nearer the blood comes to the presence of God in the Holy of Holies, the more effective it is. The power of the blood ritual is also increased by adding sprinkling to daubing.

**The more significant the offender, the more serious the sin and the more powerful must be the atoning ritual**

## The Day of Atonement

These underlying principles are given a climactic expression in Leviticus 16, which describes the unique ritual to take place on the Day of Atonement (*yom hakippurim*; traditionally Yom Kippur). This happened once a year on the tenth day of the seventh month (Lev 23.26). The first part of the ritual consisted of a special form of the Sin/Purification Offering. The high priest had to sacrifice a bull for himself and a male goat for the congregation. This time, though, the blood was brought right into the Holy of Holies by the high priest. He sacrificed a bull for himself, but one of a pair of male goats (chosen by lot) for

the congregation. The extreme nature and danger of this ritual are emphasized in various ways. The high priest needed to bring incense into the Holy of Holies, so that he was protected from full contact with God's presence. He only sprinkled the blood on the cover of the ark, rather than applying it with a finger, as was the case for the other two forms of the sacrifice.

Why was such a powerful atonement needed? 'Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins' (Lev 16.16). No system of purification would ever be fully effective, and indeed there were some sins that could not be atoned for through sacrifice (Num 15.30). The purpose of the Day of Atonement was to deal with the accumulated impurities of the rest of the year, wherever they were and whoever they came from. It was to be the equivalent of a grand spring-clean, an annual rebooting of the purity system. The blood brought into the Holy of Holies purified the whole sanctuary.

## **The Sacrifice of Christ in Hebrews**

For the author of the epistle to the Hebrews this graded system inspired a creative reflection on the sacrifice of Christ, the great high priest (Heb 8–10). In various ways the author emphasizes the unique, once-for-all offering of the blood of Christ in contrast to the repeated and ineffective animal sacrifices. The paradox of his argument is that the more we appreciate the value and power of the Levitical sacrifices, the more we shall appreciate the far greater work of Christ. The author is also aware of the complex relationship between sin and impurity. Most references are to purification from sin (Heb 1.3), but in Hebrews 9.13–14 he refers to the effective physical purification of a person who has become impure through contact with a corpse. How much more, he goes on to argue, will the blood of Christ purify the conscience from dead works. It is possible to make a simple contrast between the external Levitical system and the internal purification available through Christ. But in fact Leviticus itself is aware of the limitations of physical purification and the existence of sinful impurities that cannot be atoned for.

## **The Scapegoat**

The Day of Atonement had a second part to its ritual that introduced an element not found anywhere else: the scapegoat. Lots have been cast over two goats, one of which is 'for the Lord' (the Sin/Purification Offering), while the other is 'for Azazel.' It is possible to relate these two parts as an integrated and complementary movement. The high priest first brought all the impurities into the Holy of Holies. These were then taken by the second goat from the very heart of God's presence to the uttermost expression of his absence, the chaotic wilderness. 'Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the

live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness' (Lev 16.21). Normally an offerer lays one hand on a sacrifice, signifying identity and designation. The two hands here suggest something stronger, a transfer. Azazel was probably originally a demonic being who dwelt in the wilderness. But here this figure is emptied of all power and personality and becomes the symbolic destination for all Israel's sins and impurities. The goal was a decisive, comprehensive dealing with all that threatened the sanctuary. The uniqueness of the ritual was highlighted by the special clothing of the chief actor, the high priest. Rather than his usual splendid garments (Exod 28), he wore special, simple linen clothes that foregrounded his representative character rather than his hierarchical supremacy. The people were caught up in what he was doing; they identified with the potential deadly consequences of their sins and impurities through cessation of work and fasting (Lev 16.29).

## Later Interpretations

Because sacrifice was such an unfamiliar and puzzling custom for later interpreters, they often tried to 'explain' it through another, more familiar, model. A common reformed approach tended to read the texts through the lawcourt metaphor: the death of the animal substituted for the punishment of death due to a sinner. But concepts such as substitution and punishment are not easily found in the text. In the ancient world sacrifice is the concept used to explain other things, rather than something that is itself explained. Sacrifice tells the story about how the blood deriving from the death of an animal can deal with the consequences of impurity and sin. This is simply how things work. This lawcourt model and the sacrificial system are not necessarily incompatible, but combining them leads to confusion, and subordinating one to the other can overlook key insights not found in the other.<sup>10</sup>

Paul draws upon the language of sacrifice when he refers to 'Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a *hilasterion* by his blood, effective through faith' (Rom 3.24–25). *hilasterion* is related to the 'atone' root, and in the Greek translation of the Old Testament refers to the cover of the ark (traditionally translated the 'mercy seat'). This played a central role in the Day of Atonement ritual, when the sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the cover and atoned for all the sins and impurities of Israel (Lev 16.14–16). There has been a vigorous debate whether *hilasterion* should be translated 'propitiation' (ie dealing with God's anger) or 'expiation' (simply dealing with sin). But in the priestly system atonement was, above all, necessary to restore the relationship between God and his people, so perhaps 'sacrifice of atonement' helpfully highlights the source of Paul's idea in Israel's worship. What is being emphasized in Romans

is that the death of Christ accomplished the restorative purpose of the entire sacrificial system, represented by its climactic ritual.

The world of sacrifice remains alien to most of us. Yet it is worth remembering that when the final version of Leviticus was produced the ritual's power would consist not in its performance (the exiles had no Temple), but in the

**The symbolic universe of Leviticus communicates abiding truths about God**

readers' imagination. The symbolic universe of Leviticus communicates abiding truths about God, sin, atonement and purification.

This universe of signs, now seen more fully in Christ, can continue to inspire imaginative interpreters, whether in word or in the drama of worship. Holy and profane space, movement to and away, clothing, incense, water, oil, bread, light can all become the means to encounter a Lord who is both holy and yet graciously enables us to enter his presence through the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ.

## Ethics

The second half of Leviticus moves from an exposition of purity and graded holiness to a concern for the holiness of the whole people in the land. The corresponding changes in language and content are one reason why chapters 17–27 have been assigned to a separate source or tradition, the holiness code (H), with particular links to Deuteronomy and Ezekiel. Some scholars have seen this as reflecting a deliberate correction or contradiction to the earlier chapters, especially in an ethical direction.<sup>11</sup> However, morality is not absent from texts such as Leviticus 5 and 16, and priestly concerns and graded holiness are found in the holiness code (Lev 22; 23). The holiness of the whole people is emphasized in Leviticus 19.2, but this is also found at the end of the rules about unclean animals. All the Israelites are commanded, ‘Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy’ (Lev 11.44). This could be an addition from the editors of H, but it also makes sense in context, for respecting the food laws depends on the commitment of the people in general. It is possible to relate many of the differences to a different context and subject matter, rather than different sources or traditions. It is unhelpful, unnecessary and anachronistic to drive a wedge between ritual and morality.

There are other indications of the overarching unity of Leviticus. Seven is the characteristic number of holy time and found throughout, such as the number of times blood is sprinkled (Lev 16.11–28), the length of the two major festivals in Leviticus 23, and the number of times certain keywords are repeated in other chapters (for example, ‘holy’ in chapter 21, ‘Israel’ in chapter 22). From a more general point of view, the relationship to the holy Lord nourished in worship is the motivation for the worshipper’s commitment to morality and justice. The priestly tradition sets out a positive pattern for how ritual and ethics are to be linked. This is consistent with how the prophets call the people to account when they exercise outward piety apart from just behaviour (Amos 5.18–24; see also Matt 23).

### Moral Impurity

Leviticus 17–27 can be divided into several distinct subsections. An opening exhortation warns Israel against imitating the behaviour of the Egyptians and Canaanites (Lev 18.1–5). This is followed by a series of laws setting out forbidden sexual relations and other practices. The close of the chapter

describes the result of such practices as defiling (making unclean), leading to the land becoming unclean and vomiting out its inhabitants. Leviticus 20 repeats most of these prohibitions, while also adding the appropriate punishments. Simple physical impurity is not sinful, but in this chapter certain acts generate a moral impurity that has drastic consequences for which (in contrast to physical impurity) there is no atonement. Only death or exile can deal with these sins and their consequent moral impurity. This kind of impurity strikes at the very heart of a relationship with God and also affects the land. We might compare the sin against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3.29).

The list of forbidden relations in Leviticus 18.7–17 first sets out the relatives with whom a person would commit incest. This would be important for a household consisting of an extended family. Incest laws prohibit sexual relations between men and unmarried women or widows who would be in frequent and close contact. Today our families tend to be more nuclear than extended, so incest is defined in a more limited way, but the suffering of those who have been sexually abused emphasizes the wisdom of the protection provided by these laws. The laws that follow prohibit (deliberate) sexual relations with a menstruant, adultery, giving offspring to Moloch, homosexual relations and bestiality (Lev 18.19–25; see also 20.2–5, 13–18).<sup>12</sup>

## **The Familial Paradigm**

From a broader point of view, many of the laws in these chapters can be understood as seeking to maintain what has been called the familial paradigm.<sup>13</sup> The laws are concerned not so much with the rights of the individual as with the good ordering of the community, especially as expressed in the extended family. A person discovers their identity within the complementary and complex relationships of a family. The practices condemned in Leviticus 18 and 20 undermine the stability and viability of the Israelite family. In turn the well-being of the nation depended on strong family bonds. The danger of unrestrained sexuality is set out with tragic power in the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba and Amnon's incestuous rape of Tamar, his sister (2 Sam 11–13). The tragic consequences affected not just David and his family, but the entire nation.

## **A Holy Nation**

These two predominantly negative chapters bracket the more positive vision of a holy nation set out in Leviticus 19. A first point to note is how the Ten Commandments (Exod 20.2–17) underlie a number of these laws (honouring parents, v 2; keeping the Sabbaths, vv 3, 30; not making idols, v 4; not stealing, v 11; not bearing false witness, v 11; not using the Lord's name in vain v 12). Moreover, the Ten Commandments begin with a phrase declaring who

is giving these laws: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery' (Exod 20.2). In Leviticus 19 the declaration 'I am the Lord' or 'I am the Lord your God' comes throughout, while the Exodus motif is given prominence as a concluding motivation (Lev 19.35, 36). Biblical law only finds its proper place in a covenantal framework. Israel is invited to obey the law out of gratitude to the Lord who has graciously saved them. This is no different from the gospel pattern of grace and demand, which emphasizes how a divine act of salvation motivates and energizes external obedience.

A second point is that the command to 'love your neighbour as yourself' comes at the climactic middle and end of the chapter. In verses 11–18 a number of terms have been used for fellow-Israelites: associate, neighbour (both three times); people or children of your people (vv 16, 18); brother (v 18). However, in verses 33–34 this is extended to foreigners who are residing in Israel. They are to be treated like a native. Jesus echoed the flow of this argument when he not only affirmed the priority of the love commandment, but also criticized any limits to its scope (as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10.25–37). The emphasis throughout the chapter on harmonious relationships between different social categories indicates that the law of love should not be read individualistically. The purpose of the law was to guard against the inequalities that were condemned by the prophets and corrosive of social harmony. We may think of growing unrest in nations with vast imbalances of wealth and power. There were indeed many in Israel with unequal status (poor, hired servant, foreigner), but all were to be treated as if they were a brother or neighbour: 'You shall love your neighbour as [someone who is of equivalent covenantal status to] yourself.' Love is a mode of behaving and feeling that flows from a growing realization of what it means to belong by grace to God's covenant people.

### **There is a deliberate interweaving of religious and ethical commandments**

A third point is that there is a deliberate interweaving of religious and ethical commandments. The chapter begins with the fifth and fourth of the Ten Commandments (Lev 19.3), which act as the hinge between the God-directed and neighbour-directed commandments. The Sabbath is holy and belongs to God in a special way, but has profound social consequences (Exod 20.9–10). The Israelites are to revere (literally 'fear') their parents, who are those closest to us after God, and on whom we depend for the life that has its ultimate origin in God. However, the laws also ensure that the realm of God's specific holiness and that of ordinary life are not confused or merged. This seems to be the goal of the command not to mix different categories (Lev 19.19–20). Ordinary Israelites were not to mix wool and linen, but it is precisely

this mix that features in the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. This same fabric included cherubim, creatures that were a mix of different species (Exod 26.31). These characterize the holy realm of God rather than what takes place in the profane, earthly realm. But the main purpose of the combination of commandments is to emphasize that the whole of life is to be ordered in accord with the nature and will of the holy God.

## **Addendum: The Texts Prohibiting Homosexual Activity**

Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13 have traditionally been understood as absolute condemnations of any kind of homosexual activity, but this has recently been challenged. A superficial argument is that these laws are as anachronistic and irrelevant as others we no longer follow (not to eat pork or shellfish). But this ignores the importance of context in interpretation. These verses are found alongside laws against adultery, incest and bestiality, which most would see as reflecting important and universal ethical standards. Their seriousness is also reflected by the death penalty sanctioned in Leviticus 20.13. However, laws usually assume a certain set of conditions for their validity. ‘Do not murder’ (Exod 20.13) does not apply in war or judicial execution. Interpreting law requires reflection on rationale and purpose, but this is not explicit here. The language used is also obscure, more literally ‘You shall not lie with a male (as) the lyings of a woman.’

Some have argued that this only applies to Israel and not the nations, or only in the land, or to men only, or because it avoids procreation and so negates the command to be fruitful.<sup>14</sup> But these are largely arguments from silence—after all, Israel is to be a model for the nations, the law was given on Sinai (outside the land), Paul applies this idea to women in Romans 1.26, and adultery (also forbidden here) can be procreative. Yet the argument from silence cuts both ways, and explaining the specific combination of laws in this section proves difficult for all.

It becomes quickly evident that an interpreter’s approach depends to a significant extent on prior assumptions about the nature of our gendered humanity. A persuasive argument one way or the other requires a careful exploration of what the whole Bible says not just about homosexuality, but also about our sexuality and the nature of marriage. In turn this cannot be undertaken without a broader understanding of human nature then and now.<sup>15</sup> The complexity of the discussion emphasizes how important it is to cultivate the virtues of humility and openness on all sides.

# 6

## Time

We have looked at holiness in space, in people, and in rituals such as the consecration of the priests. Two chapters towards the end of Leviticus highlight the importance of a fourth dimension of holiness: that of time. Leviticus 23 begins with the Sabbath (v 3), and then (after a second introduction in verse 4) lists a series of festivals through the year. The Sabbath is unique in that it is not related to any natural rhythm, for the seven-day pattern is independent of the movement of sun or moon. In the priestly creation story (Gen 2.1–3) it is the climax of the unique week of creation. Israel is to enact holiness in time by mirroring God's rest after creation. The Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel writes of the 'architecture of time':

Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn; a shrine that even apostasy cannot easily obliterate.<sup>16</sup>

The main body of Leviticus 23 sets out six festivals. Three are in the first half of the year (Passover-Unleavened Bread; First Fruits; Weeks) and are matched by three in the autumn, all in the seventh month (Trumpets; Day of Atonement; Booths or Sukkot). Both Unleavened Bread and Booths are seven-day festivals, but the first is preceded by Passover and the second concludes with a special festival on the eighth day. Only their first and seventh days are 'holy convocations,' indicating that lighter work is permitted on the other days. The Sabbath and the Day of Atonement are 'a Sabbath of solemn rest,' more literally a 'sabbathly Sabbath' or 'super-Sabbath.' This indicates a strong prohibition of any work at all. In addition the Day of Atonement is a day of fasting.

Modern Western culture is well on its way to dismissing the idea of holiness in both space and time. People sometimes remark that they are as close (or closer) to God in a garden as in a church. But this ignores the fact that most people do encounter God in a special way in a holy place. Just as the distinctive customs and rituals of a wedding enable those involved to celebrate the special character of the event, so does worship help people meet God in a way that transcends the everyday. Worship in a holy space on a holy day is

continuous with how Israelites celebrated God's being and work during the year. Conversely, the loss of the Sabbath has contributed to a general loss of awareness of God's reality, as well as the weakening of family and community life. The street parties marking the recent royal Jubilee played an immensely positive role in the life of communities, but they are occasional and secular. In the past (and still occasionally today) the local festivities on church festivals strengthen corporate bonds in a regular and sanctified way. Nowadays, Sunday is no longer special, and churches are on a par with museums and stately homes as tourist attractions detached from real life. Leviticus 23, in contrast, seeks to provide a framework of holy time that allows families and the nation, not merely individuals, to come together and celebrate as one before the Lord.

## **Festivals and the Pattern of the Year**

The festivals are tied to the natural cycle of the year, with planting in the spring, the end of the barley harvest coinciding with Weeks, and the rest of the harvesting finished in the autumn. But these gifts of the created world are tied to God's mighty acts of salvation. Israel's life depended on their Lord as creator and saviour. Leviticus 23 makes a link between the Exodus and Booths (v 43), and it was perhaps not necessary to make explicit the relation of the Exodus to Passover and Unleavened Bread (Exod 12). Later Jewish tradition also associated Weeks with the making of the covenant and giving of the law at Sinai. These associations emphasize that Israel can only enjoy the blessings of the land because the Lord rescued them from Egypt and entered into a covenant with them.

Similar moves are evident in the development of the church year. The year begins in Advent, when people prepare for the celebration of the coming of Christ at Christmas and Epiphany. Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost continue the story of the ministry, death and resurrection of Christ, followed by his ascension and the sending of the Spirit. The year thus becomes a vivid representation of the central story of salvation. Some churches pay relatively little regard to this sequence, and the traditional ways in which the seasons have been ritually marked. The danger is a rather abstract, intellectual approach to faith. Recovering this pattern of the year may be an important goal in a culture that has lost any sense of a grand narrative that embraces the created world but is able to see beyond it in expectant hope.

## **Sabbath of the Land and Jubilee**

Leviticus 25 extends the ordering of holy time in Leviticus 23 beyond the single year. Every seven years the land is to have a Sabbath rest, and every 49 years there is to be a 'Sabbath squared,' a Jubilee, where the land has two years' rest.<sup>17</sup> The holy number seven underlies and integrates the whole system.

Whether it be the seventh day, the seventh year or the seven-squared year, that time is holy, distinct from other times and belonging to God in a special way. As in Genesis 1, humans are not the measure of all things, for they only comprise one facet of a complex, interlinked created world. The Sabbath of the land will provide food not just for people and domestic animals, but also for wild animals.

The main purpose of the Jubilee is to restore ancestral land to those who have fallen on hard times and had to lease it to others, perhaps because of bad management or ill luck. The land can never be sold, for it is the Lord who owns the land and allows his slaves, the Israelites, to work it (Lev 25.42, 55).<sup>18</sup> Of course, the exodus proves that this is a liberated, not an oppressive, slavery. As a result they may only sell future crops to others, not the land itself. The Jubilee prevents the unrestrained growth of economic power that the prophets criticized (see Isa 5.8). The vision of the legislation is the maintenance of a family rooted in a particular place.

As is the case with the rest of Leviticus, it is very difficult to know how fully the ideals of the text were realized in practice, but perhaps this uncertainty emphasizes how such a law requires imagination in applying it to a later day and age. The Jubilee 2000 campaign is just one example of how the Jubilee could become a powerful symbol for the forgiveness of debt and the possibility of a new start. Less attention has been paid to the crucial role that land plays. The importance of a rooted inheritance for the family and community is highlighted by the way in which refugees or migrants often lose not just their sense of place, but also of their cultural identity and even moral bearings. The growing tendency of land law is to equate land with capital, but Leviticus 25 suggests that land belongs to a different category entirely. It provides the substrate for the relationships that make community possible. Those who have roots in a place will also be more aware of their responsibility to care for it for future generations. The careless displacement of natives and exploitation of land for individual profit is the cause of many of the ecological scandals of our time. Large-scale agriculture for profit often leads to degradation of the land and a catastrophic loss of fertility for which future generations will have to pay.

**Land provides the substrate for the relationships that make community possible**

# 7

## Conclusion

Modern readers tend to be more familiar and comfortable with the later ethical emphases of Leviticus than its earlier instructions about worship. However, these two aspects are integrated with one another and have much to teach about what it means to belong to God's people. Leviticus provides a model of worship that richly integrates holy space, holy people, holy acts and holy time. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but reflects a pastoral wisdom in acknowledging that there are different degrees of fault, and different ways to deal with them in an appropriate way. Further, it was probably always meant to be an ideal model that was to be interpreted flexibly in the light of later circumstances. Underlying the priestly system are the same concerns of worship in every age. Through specific rituals and symbols God's people are forgiven, purified and restored. They are enabled to praise the Lord, and to know the joy of his presence in the company of others. This is what Jesus comes to bring about by his ministry of healing and forgiveness, and ultimately through his sacrifice on the cross.

These things become true for us not so much in thought as in action. Ritual can be understood as 'the conversion of essences into acts.'<sup>19</sup> It is vital that we read the Scriptures, meditate, pray and speak about our faith. Yet all these can become overly mental and abstract, carried out by isolated individuals.

### **Leviticus emphasizes that we are embodied and social creatures**

Leviticus, in line with the New Testament, emphasizes that we are embodied and social creatures. Worship requires us to act as whole and embodied people, whether through sacrifice or through participation in the eucharist. Because in the sanctuary God is encountered as both holy and just, worship cannot be divorced from a commitment to loving the neighbour in daily life. Leviticus emphasizes that this includes personal, social, financial and ecological dimensions. As such it anticipates the final vision of Revelation, where sin, impurity and death are banished, where Tabernacle, Temple, city and fruitful earth are one, and where God will dwell for ever in the midst of a people who have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb (Rev 21–22).

## Some Helpful Commentaries and Books on Leviticus

S E Balentine, *Leviticus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002). Addresses, in a perceptive way, a number of the difficulties modern readers have in reading Leviticus.

L L Grabbe, *Leviticus* (OTG; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993). An introduction to the scholarly discussion of Leviticus.

J Goldingay, *Exodus and Leviticus for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2010). Not a standard commentary, but selective and thoughtful comments on the text.

J Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). A summary of the work of a great Jewish scholar.

R Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004). A warm commentary combining scholarship with extensive discussion of the text's potential application today.

G J Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979). A fine commentary with especially helpful broader discussions of important themes.

T M Willis, *Leviticus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009). Pays close attention to the text and concisely sketches different interpretations.

# Notes

- 1 See <http://www.buildingchurchleaders.com/articles/2007/lifeinleviticus.html>
- 2 W Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1982).
- 3 T M Willis, *Leviticus* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009) pp xvii–xviii.
- 4 J Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) p 1397.
- 5 See further P P Jenson, ‘Holiness in the Priestly Writings of the Old Testament,’ in S C Barton (ed), *Holiness: Past and Present* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2003) pp 93–121.
- 6 Explored in detail in P P Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).
- 7 For an attractive exposition of the paradox of transcendence and immanence in a church see M Visser, *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery, and Meaning in an Ordinary Church* (Toronto: Harper Flamingo Canada, 2000).
- 8 See further below in chapter 5. The older view was that H was earlier and incorporated into P.
- 9 For discussion available online see J M Sprinkle, ‘The Rationale of the Laws of Clean and Unclean in the Old Testament,’ *JETS* 43 (2000) pp 637–657.
- 10 For reflections on method see C Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor: Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1988).
- 11 I Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) has been extremely influential.
- 12 The two texts prohibiting homosexual activity have given rise to a complex discussion impossible to summarize within the limits of this booklet. Different views are represented by P A Bird, ‘The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation Concerning Homosexuality: Old Testament Contributions,’ in D L Balch (ed), *Homosexuality, Science, and the ‘Plain Sense’ of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000) pp 142–176 (a summary is available online) and the writings of Robert Gagnon (his review of Bird is available online).
- 13 W Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).
- 14 J Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) p 196.
- 15 See for example W J Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001) and R M Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).
- 16 A J Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951) p 8.
- 17 For ‘Sabbath squared’ see J P Burnside, *God, Justice, and Society: Aspects of Law and Legality in the Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 18 In Leviticus 25.42 the same word is translated as ‘servants’ and ‘slaves.’
- 19 Leon Wieseltier, cited in S E Balentine, *Leviticus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002) p 182.

Leviticus has a poor reputation. Many people, when reading through the Bible, come to grief here. What is the relevance of a book concerned with the minutiae of forms of worship from thousands of years ago?

The answer is—much indeed. When understood aright, Leviticus is a book that is concerned with holiness, sacrifice, purity and ethics, and offers an integrated vision of the holy life of a holy people lived for a holy God. This engaging study leads the reader to see Leviticus' richness and relevance today.



**The Revd Dr Philip Jenson** trained for the Anglican ministry at Ridley Hall in Cambridge, where he has returned to teach Old Testament in the Cambridge Theological Federation. His special interests include the Pentateuch, especially the book of Leviticus, Biblical Theology and the Christian interpretation of the Bible.

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