

# The Book of Leviticus

## Scripture View

### OVERVIEW:

The Book of Leviticus comes from the ritualistic laws handed down by the priestly class of Levites. Whether they were written at the time of the exile in 500 BC or at the time of Moses and Aaron is still debated. If written at the time of the exile, they may have been from the rituals of the temple that was destroyed. However, there is nothing to say that the temple rituals weren't adopted by the rituals handed down to Aaron many centuries before. In any case, there is evidence to suggest that the compiler of the Hebrew canon of scriptures attributed the authorship of Leviticus to Moses. It is best to review Leviticus from the compiler's perspective as he reflects on the way in which the rituals came to be.

The central purpose for these rituals is repeated throughout the 27 chapters of Leviticus: "You shall be holy as I Am holy."

### A Closer Look at the Sacrificial Rituals (1-7):

Chapters 1-7 cover the previously mentioned rituals in Exodus, but with greater detail. Remembering that the Lord is the Master of detail, a sign of perfect holiness, Moses and Aaron are called to fulfill these ritualistic details as participants in God's perfect holiness. The Sacrificial Rituals are:

#### Holocausts (Chapter 1):

Also known as a burnt offering, the holocaust is a token of dedication to the Lord. An unblemished male bull, sheep or goat, or turtledove or pigeon is to be offered. After laying his hands on the bull (a sign of atonement, the priest slaughters the bull in a ritualistic way and the priests (Aaron's sons) sprinkle the altar with the blood. The holocaust continues with the burning of the meat and (washed) organs on the altar as "a sweet smelling oblation to the Lord."

#### Cereal Offerings (Chapter 2):

Also known as Meal Offerings, often accompanies

burnt offerings and (Chpt 3) peace offerings. The unleavened and salted (a symbol of friendship) offering would be shared (in communion) with God and the priests.

#### Peace Offerings (Chapter 3):

The peace offering was an offering of the people to give praise (*todah* in Hebrew) to God. Unlike the holocaust offering, the gift could be an unblemished male or female from the herd or flock.

#### The Sin Offerings (Chapter 4-5:13):

These offerings were designed for reconciliation purposes and for not deliberate sins. Sin offerings were made for priests (bull), the whole community (bull), princes (goat), and private persons (female goat or lamb).

#### Guilt Offerings (Chapter 5:14ff):

Unlike sin, guilt is associated with an act (with or without knowledge) that has a negative social effect. *Forgetting* to pay or *deliberately failing* to pay dues, for example, required restitution and a guilt offering (unblemished ram of the flock).

Chapters 6 & 7 provide more detail for the holocaust, cereal, peace, sin and guilt offerings. The holocaust fire is to be kept burning daily. The priest may not partake in his own personal cereal offering. The peace offering's flesh must be consumed on the day of the offering. The priests alone may partake in the sin and guilt offerings.

#### A Closer Look at the Ordination Ritual (8-10):

As the Israelites are *set apart* (as a holy nation), Aaron and his sons are *set apart* to do the holy work of God for Israel. Moses offers the ordination ritual.

Chapter 8 includes the investiture of Aaron and his sons in their priestly garments, anointing with oil, dedication of blood (placed on Aarons ear, hand and toe), sacrificial rituals - sin, holocaust, and peace offerings and then seven days *set apart* in seclusion.



Chapter 9 gives the octave (eighth day) ceremony after the seven day retreat, Aaron and his sons again present the various sacrificial offerings and, after the final peace offering, the Lord comes down (in fire) and consumes the holocaust and fat remnants on the altar. At seeing this, the Israelites all fall prostrate.

Chapter 10 tells of the error of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, which cost them their lives. Verse 9 gives us an indication that their sacrificial error may have been due to being drunk. By mismanaging the sacrificial fires at the altar, God strikes them dead (consumes them). Moses reminds Aaron and two new priests to be alert and avoid drink when conducting their religious duties.

### **A Closer Look at the Purification Laws (11-16):**

Each of these chapters show the purification laws necessary in order to be in the presence of God who is perfect. Again, the theme continues: "Be Holy as I Am Holy."

Chapter 11 focuses on what food is clean and unclean. Of the land animals, only those that have cloven footed hoofs and chew their cud. For example, it is unlawful to eat a pig or touch its body, because it has a cloven hoof, but it does not chew its cud. Various birds, insects, rodents and crawling creatures are also rendered unclean. If you eat or touch these creatures, you are made unclean until evening. Presumably, one was made clean with the altar fires which remain as a vigil from evening to morning where it is again stoked for further sacrificial offerings. However, this remains unclear.

Chapter 12 describes the necessary purification rites for a woman after childbirth. After 40 days for a boy and 80 days for a girl, the mother brings the child to the priest, along with a yearling lamb and pigeon or dove (or two turtledoves or two pigeons) for a holocaust and sin offering. Then, after making atonement for her, she is made clean.

Chapter 13-14 offers the rituals for leprosy. If their is a skin disorder, a priest will determine whether or not it is leprosy. A period of 7 days quarantine is required. If it is more than eczema, the person is declared unclean and must cry out, "Unclean, unclean!" and live apart from the community. Leprosy can also apply to clothes and houses (mould or fungus). These chapters also deal with the purification sacrifices required to declare a former leper clean.

Chapter 15 refers to seminal or menstrual flows that make a person unclean and anything or any person the unclean touches.

Chapter 16 describes the Day of Atonement rituals for the priest (Holy of Holies and scapegoat rites) and the community (a solemn sabaath) once a year.

### **A Closer Look at Codes of Holiness (Chapters 17-26):**

The chapters following at as a Code of Law for rituals and general behavior, including penalties associated with violating the laws.

Chapter 17 refers to the sacredness of blood from animals. Blood is the life and without it, we die. Therefore, the life of an animal (the blood) is poured out at the tent to God and not to be consumed.

Chapter 18 describes immoral sexual behavior. Incest, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality which were a part of the cult of Canaan, were taboos for the Israelite community and to perform such acts meant to be "cut off" from the community.

Chapter 19 reminds the Israelites that that they are to be holy as the Lord God is holy. This sets the stage to live according to the basic rules of human dignity ... caring for the poor, respecting people's rights, honoring life, etc.

Chapter 20 (see also 24) describes the penalties for the crimes listed above. Because they are deliberate sins against God and humanity, the penalty often includes death. The radical penalties are to remind the people that they have been set apart from other nations. This is all to remind them that they have been chosen by God and they are not to live like the people in Canaan lest they be cut off.

Chapter 21 & 22 reminds the priests, including the high priest, that they have been further "set apart" and must conduct themselves in a way that is even holier than the rest. This does not mean that they have special favor. It simply means that they have been chosen - set apart - to maintain the holy communion between God and Israel.

Chapter 23 gives us the set feasts: Sabbath (day of rest); Passover and the following seven days of unleavened bread; after seven weeks, First Fruits (April); The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost); and the three feasts in the seventh month (September/October) -Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (A reminder of the tent dwelling days following Israel's deliverance from Egypt).

Chapter 25 describes the Sabbatical Year (7th) and Jubilee Year (15th Year) where the land and crops must remain fallow. In this way, the Israelites remember that the land belongs to God and the wealthy are prevented from gaining more land.

Chapter 26 reminds the people that they are to obey the commands of God. They will be rewarded or punished according to their actions.

Chapter 27 focuses on the other gifts vowed to the Lord including people, animals, houses, land, and tithes. If it isn't fitting for the Lord, it may be sold or redeemed by the one making the offering to support the expenses of the Holy Dwelling.