

## LEVITICUS the book – a rough synopsis

Today we prefer structure in written texts. So how are we to present Leviticus which rattles on and on and on? Here is a suggested overview by Derek Tidball

Sacrifices ch1-7.

Commentary: D Tidball *Leviticus* 1996.

Priesthood ch8-10.

Purity ch11-15.

Atonement ch16.

Holiness ch17-27

My list of contents below are untidy and imperfect. I do not make judgements on whether I agree or disagree about their application. It's just a summary list of the contents of each section, although I have decided to put some comments in this smaller print size from time to time. Big print refers to the text of Leviticus, small print is comment.

There is an important refrain in the book e.g. *Lev 11.45* "For I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt to be your God; you shall therefore be holy for I am holy." We need to explore what this phrase does and does not mean - it is a challenge to explain it.

### ch 1-7 Sacrifices

Instructions on the rituals and the need to honour God by doing them the correct way so that the key activity focuses the worshipper on YHWH and respects the communal participation. The best has to be offered without blemish. Salt of the covenant, no leaven, no honey *Lev 2*. Blood poured out. Burnt offerings = "a pleasing odour". Family and community involvement in the events is key. Peace offerings, no eating of fat or blood *Lev3*. Laying on of hands and taking offering out of the camp to a clean place. Forgiveness of sins and unwitting sins is assured through correct procedures and proper approach "and they shall be forgiven" *Lev 4.20*. Forgiveness by God predates Jesus. The sin of a witness that does not speak up *Lev 5*. What to do if you make a rash oath *Lev 5.4*. Or breaches of faith. Poor people have cheaper options for offerings. Guilt offerings.

### ch 8-10 Priesthood

Their role and responsibilities and lengthy ordination rituals. A specific encounter with God "Today the Lord will appear before you . . and the glory of the Lord will appear before you." *Lev9.4b,9.6* . . "when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces." *Lev 9.24*. Avoiding sloppiness in following the rituals, and being ritually 'clean' is necessary before a holy God. That they too must offer sacrifices for the atonement of their sins before they can offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. Rules on what part of a sacrifice they can eat and keep for themselves, even to a detail about the 'sell by date' of 3 days for the sacrifice to be disposed of.

ch10 - At the first inauguration of the priest's role, there is a one-off disaster story about the careless approach to God – Aaron's sons, Nadab & Abihu die & Aaron is not to complain about his grief). In my view there is a parallel story for the early inauguration of the church - Ananias & Sapphira's sudden deaths. Acts 5. Distinguishing between "clean and unclean" & "holy and the common". Moses disagrees about some priests doing things wrongly Lev 10.10.- but discussion resolves the issue Lev 10.16. Here is cue to adapting Scripture wisely through debate. Jesus refers to "loose" or "bind" - a Hebraic approach to changes in interpretation Matt 16.19; 18.18

### ch 11-15 Purity – wholeness

ch11 Kosher food - what you can and cannot eat. The list is complex and a puzzling - Rabbis today still disagree over some foods whether they are kosher or not.

Ch 12 Post birth rituals for women and circumcision for male child on 8th day Exactly followed by Joseph & Mary Luke 2.21ff also indicating that Joseph & Mary were not wealthy.

Ch13-14 Skin diseases and the avoidance of spread in self or clothing or materials. This is not leprosy (Hansen's disease) in its modern sense.

Ch 15 Discharges from the body, and menstruation. Relevant to the story of the woman with the issue of blood touching Jesus's prayer shawl fringes Luke 8.40ff.

### ch 16 Atonement

The priest must carefully prepare to enter the "Holy Place" beyond the curtain to the "mercy seat" - the lid over the ark containing the law Lev 16.2. The day of Atonement - Yom Kippur - forgiveness for the whole community. "Within the veil, alone". Confession of sin, blood shed, over a goat which "bears all their iniquities" Lev 16.22. Hebrews ch9-10 explores Lev 16 fully. Chapter 16 provides vital clues to understand the atonement achieved by Messiah, Jesus. Note: there is no *retributive* hint in these sacrifices. The animal 'suffers' death but the offering is not being 'punished', it bears the sins through laying on of hands. Romans – "expiation" = *hilasterion* Gk. "Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an *expiation* by his blood" Romans 3.25. If I understand N.T. Wright correctly; he suggests Paul is thinking of Lev 16.2 – The priest at the mercy-seat on the Day of Atonement because the LXX, the Old Testament Greek translation, uses a Gk word for the mercy seat closely associated to *hilasterion*. See W.C. Kaiser explanation at the end of the document.

### ch 17-27 Holiness - loving your neighbour.

Ch 17- Where & why to bring sacrifices so as not to mingle with the rituals of other gods. No eating of blood. The blood is the 'life' - and take care to avoid shedding it, even to the care of animals. "for the life of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life" Lev 17.11. In John 6 Jesus refers to 'eating his flesh and drinking his blood'. This is gruesome unless you know Leviticus, that we are receiving "his life", "his flesh". These ideas link to Jesus being the 'bread of life' – the manna - in the

wilderness. The feeding of the 5,000 takes place in the wild - a long way from the villages.

Ch 18 - Community sexual rules - particularly to avoid incest. Adultery forbidden. Sacrifices of children to Molech - abhorrent because it “profanes the name of your God” Lev 18.19 “Name” = the character of God. Bestiality and male same sexual practice forbidden. Warning about not conforming to the behaviours of other cultures, and they risk losing [“vomit out”] Lev 18.28 the land if the whole community fails to obey these communal rules. “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother’s wife” Lev 18.16 Applied by John the Baptist to Herod.

Ch 19 - Keeping the festivals which are holidays – sabbaths. Looking after the poor - gleaning made easy. No oppression, no fraud, no stealing, no lies, no false promises, fair wages paid on time, no oppression of the deaf or blind persons, impartial justice (not benefiting the rich), no slander, no hate for someone in your heart, rather go and reason with your opponent, no vengeance. “Love your neighbour as yourself” Lev 19.17. This key summary of the Law would not exist without Leviticus. Its context within the examples above and below demonstrates that loving your neighbour is not an emotion but a life-style practice. Not mixing things. Rules about crops. No augury, no witchcraft, no tattoos / disfigurement Present day fashion tattoos are not related to religious rituals or cults, but I think the advice is my preference, no mediums or wizards; foreigners to have full rights; care for slaves; honest weights and measures; honour older people.

Ch 20 - No child sacrifices (repeated), death penalty for adulterers and other sexual practices. Jesus does not apply the death penalty in the ‘test’ adultery case brought by the Pharisees in John 8. Similarly Paul does not apply a death penalty for incest in 1Cor5. “You shall be holy to me for I, YHWH, am holy and have separated you from the people” Lev 20.22 which implies “holy” as being “set apart for. . .”

Ch 21 & 22 - Rules for priests not to “defile” themselves by touching dead bodies (close relative excepted). The Good Samaritan parable which counters this instruction demonstrates the need to consider the intent of an instruction rather than a legalistic view Luke 10.29. A priest with a physical impairment is not permitted to fulfil the priestly role. An issue here about discrimination for disabilities? Offerings for sacrifices must be the very best Lev 22.17. Care for animals.

Ch 23 - All the holidays (sabbaths) to be observed and on which specific dates:-

- Weekly sabbath,
- 14th/15th day of the 1st sacred month (Nisan) Pesach - Passover.
- First Fruits - barley harvest - the 1st day after the sabbath which follows Passover.

- Counting 7 weeks (49 days after First Fruits) a harvest - Shavuot - Pentecost. A reminder about permitting gleaning for the poor.
- 1st day of the 7 sacred month (around October) - Shofar - Trumpets
- 10th day of the 7th month - Yom Kippur - The Day of Atonement - a fast.
- 15th day of the 7th sacred month - Succot - feast of Booths/Tents/Tabernacles. "You shall rejoice before YHWH" – this is a law ! *Torah* is better translated as "instruction", than "Law".

Ch 24 - Recipe for the oil for the golden lampstand. The 12 loaves - the "bread of the Presence." Of which David gave to his soldiers 1 Sam 21.6, and Jesus refers to counter Pharisaic Sabbath rules for his disciples Matt 12.1-8. A grim story about blasphemy of the 'name' Lev 24.10 i.e attributing to God what is not in his character or intention. Death sentence for murder. Many USA Christians cite this for continuing to uphold the execution of criminals, despite failures in criminal justice and offenders mental health issues, or being black etc. No excessive punishments for crimes - at most an eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth. Jesus emphasises forgiveness. (see later notes on this text) Paul reiterates no vengeance or returning evil for evil. Rom 12.14-21

Ch 25 - Very complex rules about harvesting fruit trees, and use of land for crops. Seven weeks of years 49 yrs+1 for a Jubilee when liberty is proclaimed - a resetting of debts to zero and more. Many commentators suggest the Jubilee was never really adopted because of complexities in trying to return land to original owner's families. Jesus announces the Jubilee, fulfilled by his presence "the . . . year of the Lord's favour." Luke 4.17- 21 Rules for leasing houses or land for fair prices. Relatives are responsible for their families when in debt - no charging interest they are already in difficulty!

Ch26 - No idols – God will provide rains in their seasons. God will bless the whole community. "If you obey . . . I will make my abode among you, and will be your God." Lev 26.11 "But if you do not . . . scattering among the nations."

Ch27 - Valuation of males and females - discounts for the over 65s! Females valued lower than males. Issue here, again, of discrimination towards women. Perhaps that's why Luke so emphasises women and their discipleship in his gospel, and Paul in valuing women as apostles. Valuation of animals & seeds for sowing. 1/10<sup>th</sup> of crops are for YHWH. Every 10<sup>th</sup> sheep is for YHWH whether a good one or a bad one. The giving of tithes was a Torah instruction, with alms and offerings in addition. Paul in 2Cor 8-9 makes it clear that giving is totally voluntary. However generosity and trusting God to supply all we need, suggests we should offer more, not less. And this brings me to a final thought. Leviticus says, "love your neighbour as yourself". Deuteronomy 6 says, "The LORD is one (unique), and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul and strength." Strength here in Jewish thought means all your wealth and giftedness. So in the two part summary of the law quoted by Jesus, all the intent of the law is implied. And this 'ethic' is upheld by Jesus, Paul and James and most of the historic church, and a foundational for Judaeo-Christian ethics.

END of synopsis.

## LEVITICUS the book

Rarely read today. Regarded as irrelevant. Harsh and legalistic - much of its instructions should be ignored. Some question how can it be regarded as “The Word of God”.

**Q?** In what way do you think people today struggle with Leviticus ?

However, if we ignore it, we would not understand some key theological ideas in the NT - chiefly on the idea that our sins can be forgiven through Messiah Jesus’s death - his shedding his blood – a key idea about atonement - our making peace with YHWH.

It claims to be the Word of God given to Moses. However, many of us do not obey the commands given in this book. And yet Leviticus contains plenty of ‘laws’ which underpin much Western Judaeo-Christian legal systems.

The usual dodge is to say Leviticus only applies to Jews - a fair point since Paul - himself an observant Jew – knows the instructions in Leviticus for circumcision of a boy on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. He affirms that the rituals are of great value and yet can say that “circumcision is of no value” in *dealing with the power of sin*. He says that the death and resurrection of Messiah Jesus means that through faith in him, Jew and Greek, male and female are all one and equal in him, and therefore male Gentiles followers of Jesus are not required to be circumcised.

### Some NT key points to bear in mind:

As my smaller print notes in the separate synopsis point out, the NT affirms (certainly at the time of Jesus) the practice by Jews of much that is contained in Leviticus.

- Mary (with Joseph) goes to dedicate Jesus on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, and fulfils Lev 12.
- Jesus and his family attend the festivals Lev 23.
- The woman with the “issue of blood” (Luke 8.40ff) - she is unclean Lev 15: Her defiant behaviour and then fear of being found out touching someone in her condition makes it clear that she knows Leviticus. She touches Jesus’s tassels on his prayer shawl - the tassels (“fringe of his garment”) - though this item of clothing is not mentioned in Leviticus, but in Deut 6.
- In Leviticus the repeated “be holy for I am holy” especially in the context of worship links Leviticus with Deut 6.4f which contains the “first commandment”– “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul (your life energy), and with all your might (your talents, skills, possessions, money).” In addition there is the “LORD your our God is one LORD”. The “Oneness” of God can be understood as “Uniqueness” or the otherness– i.e. he is “set apart” = “holy”. Therefore the people of Israel in the worship and communal life, are called to be “set apart” from other

cultures by following the rules for worship, the civil laws in Leviticus, and in their awareness of the need for sin (witting and unwitting ones) to be atoned.

- John the Baptist - “bear fruit that befits repentance” are spelt out including not oppressing others - Lev 19.13 with Luke 3.10
- John the Baptists criticism of Herod being married to Herodias, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” Mk 6.17ff / Lev
- John ch 1 begins with a grand sweep of the books of Moses;

Genesis 1 – “in the beginning”; “in him was life, “the life is in the blood” Lev 3.

“The law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus, Messiah.” Jn 1.17 implying a fulfilment or something more is now included.

John the Baptist announces “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” – a clear reference to Leviticus 16 - where atonement implies sins taken away / removed - the second goat/lamb left to go free following the sacrifice of the first goat/lamb.

- Jesus clearly affirms Leviticus. Matthew 5:17–20 (NRSV) <sup>17</sup> “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

What follows this passage in Matthew is Jesus clarifying many issues found in Leviticus.

“You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . .” In these Jesus takes Leviticus texts and highlights the *intention* of the rules/laws is to be understood. Explore Matt 5.21-48 – rash oaths – eye for an eye Matt 5.38 / Lev 24.19-20 – adultery (lust in the heart) Matt 5.27 / Lev 18 – not to “hate someone in your heart” parallels “ everyone who is angry with his brother/sister shall be liable to judgement.” Lev 19.17 Mat 5.22f.

**Q?** How do you think the law is fulfilled (in Jesus) in the light of Matthew 5? Possible answer: As Paul describes in it Romans 8, “The law of the spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death.” So a Spirit filled believer in Jesus is set free from the power of sin, to fulfill the commands of the law.

- I believe Jesus gives us clues that the written code needs to be adapted in the new circumstances.

e.g. his not applying the death sentence for adultery (John 8, the woman brought in by the Pharisees - without the male co-adulterer.) But he does refer in other applications of sinful behaviour that judgement of sin is awaiting the unrepentant - implying as Leviticus does that sin leads to death.

e.g. his interpretation of Sabbath keeping, allowing his disciples to eat a snack whilst

on a Sabbath saunter through fields. His healing on the Sabbath and permitting carrying a mat - not counted as 'work'.

In Jesus's day there is the method of "binding" and "loosing" a law. By debate, examination of many other Scriptures and careful interpretation the application of a text can be re-interpreted. Matt 16.19, 18.18. A good example of this is the Council of Jerusalem Acts 15 – Some said, "Unless you [males] are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Acts 15.1. The debate that follows allows for testimony and Scripture to be explored, leading to a conclusion to "loose" this Mosaic law for Gentiles, but to "bind" i.e. continue to adhere to other Leviticus rules. Acts 15:19–20 (NRSV) <sup>19</sup> Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, <sup>20</sup> but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.

- Mark addresses Leviticus texts in Mark 7:- not washing - "hands defiled" Mk 7.2 . Jesus's critiques of religious traditions which turn the intent of Leviticus upside down; dis-honouring parents and the older generation Mk 7.9ff. He explains that "clean and unclean" issues are to do with what is inside a person - then listing many topics covered in Leviticus.

**Q?** What religious traditions has Christianity introduced that miss the point ?

- All the above points indicate how prominent Leviticus was in Jewish thought and debate at the time of Jesus.

**Q?** How does it fit with our culture and times? In the USA there are many right-wing "Evangelical Christian Nationalists" conniving with politics to get power to pushing for a Christian theocracy that legally demands that their interpretation of Scripture shall be imposed on all citizens; anti gay, anti abortion with no exceptions, that Christians should hold the power in the state, often with white supremacy racism.

**Q?** The church is currently in the midst of a debate about loosing or binding the Scripture about same-sex marriage. Those in favour of "loosing" the same-sex rule say that covenant relationships model an important Scriptural principle, and that two men or two women who publicly declare their covenant to remain faithful to each other for life are not bound by that text forbidding male-male sexual relations in Leviticus. The current debate or possibly societal pressure, seems to be moving towards a loosing of this text.

- **Paul** in Romans 12 affirms much of Leviticus's laws about loving one another, and on the subject of worship speaks of *acceptable* offering sacrifices of oneself - sacrifices, offerings and more are prominent in Leviticus ch1-7.
- Far more powerfully, **Jesus** quotes Lev 19.17 "love your neighbour as yourself" as a vital continuation of the OT lifestyle laws.
- **James** in his call that faithful Christians need to demonstrate lifestyles most of which

are found listed in Leviticus. Let's avoid the old nonsense that James is suggesting 'works' save you. Jesus is himself clear that a good tree produces good fruit. *Matt 7:19–20* (NRSV) <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will know them by their fruits.

## WORSHIP & PRIESTHOOD

- Leviticus has detailed instructions about how to offer sacrifices, thank offerings, and celebrating the holidays - festivals (called Sabbaths plural).

**Q?** Is there anything relevant about those instruction – that would guide us today in our worship. Some suggested answers : Much worship should be communal not individual and all-age – atonement for sins / celebration / as well as individual confession and atonement.

To prepare for worship, the offering had to be bought, prepared and taken to the priest and a meal follows. Why not consider worship to include our getting up, leaving the house and going to church be seen as worship – not just the singing of songs!

Taking care to offer wholesome worship not inferior. Approaching God humbly - aware of our unwitting sins. Giving thanksgiving offerings. Honouring the poor and clearly (from Jesus's teaching) forgiving others. e.g. Inappropriate prayers condemning people- Jesus gives an example of a proud prayer, "I thank God that I am not like others . . .".

Worshippers can use, as Jesus did, rituals and liturgical texts provided they point to glorifying God, and are Biblically based.

**Q?** What rituals and practices has the church had or has that fail to fulfil the careful approach of Leviticus ? Rood screens separating the congregation from the 'holier' priests / the laity-clergy divide / bishops wearing fancy hats (hierarchy) and . . . .? .

- Priesthood. Leviticus includes a lot about priests and their detailed roles. They are a hereditary group within the family of Israel - descendants of Aaron. Other Israelites cannot be priests.

**Q?** How do we square this hereditary group with the Exodus passage: *Exodus 19:6* (ESV) <sup>6</sup> and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." and *1 Peter 2:5* (ESV) <sup>5</sup> you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. A possible answer to the question above is that we are sons and daughters of Christ, and therefore in the family of God, and our birth family line is no longer applied? *John 1:12–13* (NRSV) <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Postscript: Just to prove there are yet more NT references to Leviticus - I add the following one noted after making these notes. At the end of Matthew's section "You have heard it said, but I say to you" (*Matt ch5*) we find, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This is so clearly Leviticus's "Be holy as I am holy".



Here are key points from D.W. Baker on why study Leviticus & W.C. Kaiser on Lev 16 the atonement.

### David W. Baker - Commentary on Leviticus

What actually makes Leviticus worth reading at all? There are three primary reasons to study Leviticus:

1. *Theological reasons.* . . . For example, the identification of Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” John 1:29 would be incomprehensible without Leviticus 4:32–35. And the unspeakable condition of a hemorrhaging woman coming into a crowd and touching someone (Mark 5:25–34) is not understood apart from Leviticus 15:25–27.

2. *Religious reasons.* Worship : . . . we will understand worship to be service for God done by his people, . . . it highlights what we are called upon to do—namely to serve and to work—and not just how we should feel about God.

3. *Historical reasons.* Leviticus is a historical artifact, the product of a people who played a significant role in the history and religion of the ancient Near East. As historical evidence of who these people were and what they believed, Leviticus is worth studying.

The Hebrew title and the first verse of the book reflect the Israelite understanding that the primary author of Leviticus was the Lord himself.

Baker, D. W. (1996). *Leviticus*. In P. W. Comfort (Ed.), *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Vol. 2, p. 4). Tyndale House Publishers.

### Kaiser, W. C., JR.

The word for and notion of “atonement” become important at this point; it occurs forty-five times in this book. The verb (*kipper* <sub>Heb</sub>, “to atone”) used to be understood as cognate with the Arabic root that means “to cover.” . . . [But this ] does not adequately convey the meaning . . . [It is better] taken from the noun *koper* <sub>Heb</sub>, which means “a ransom.” Consequently, the verb carries the meaning “to pay a ransom” or “to ransom, deliver by a substitute.”

The related noun *kapporet* <sub>Heb</sub> is used as the name for the lid on the ark, variously translated as the “mercy seat” or “atonement cover.” The same lid is labelled in Greek [LXX] (*hilasterion* <sub>Gk</sub>), a word directly applied [by Paul in Rom 3.25] to Christ’s atoning work “God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement [*hilasterion* <sub>Gk</sub>]”.

This concept of delivering and ransoming from sin by means of a substitute is most forcefully expressed in Leviticus 16 and the great Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. . . . but three times the text refers explicitly to the atonement made “on behalf of” . . . “make atonement on behalf of” the high priest and his family [16:11]; “make atonement on behalf of” all the congregation of Israel [16:17, and 24]). . . . this combination of prepositions is not used with reference to the tabernacle. The uncleanness of the sanctuary and its furniture is due to (“because of”, [16:16, 19]) the uncleanness and sinfulness of the Israelites.

The one sin offering on the great Day of Atonement is divided into two parts, as the presence of the two goats attests. The first goat is slain and its blood is taken into the holy of holies, behind the veil, where the high priest dares to enter only on this one day every year. The blood of the first goat is placed on the lid of the ark of the covenant, called here the “atonement cover” (16:14–15). After Aaron emerges from the tent of meeting, he is to lay his hands on the head of the second goat, confess all the sins of all Israel, and send the goat away into the desert. In graphic and concrete terms, the rite symbolizes two aspects in the remission of sins: [1] Sins are forgiven on the basis of a substitute that gives its life so [2] the people can go free, and sins are forgotten and removed, as the psalmist says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Ps 103:12 NIV).

Kaiser, W. C., JR. (1994–2004). *The Book of Leviticus*. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 1, pp. 998–999). Abingdon Press.