

The Book of Leviticus: Introduction

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The purpose of Leviticus is to provide a manual or handbook on holiness designed to instruct the Hebrew community in holy worship and holy living so that they might imitate God's holiness and enjoy the presence of God.¹ In light of this overarching purpose, the two key ideas in Leviticus are **holy worship** and **holy living**.

The book of Leviticus can prove challenging or even intimidating for modern Christians. Some people even joke, "Leviticus is the graveyard of plans to read through the Bible in one year!" Why is Leviticus so intimidating?

The details of the different offerings and rituals seem tedious and boring. Let's be honest: David and Goliath is a much more exciting story!

Since we are under the New Covenant, it is often difficult to see the relevance of the offerings and feasts for modern Christians.

Some of the laws which demand the death penalty sound harsh to modern ears.

The reality is that Leviticus is a treasury of insights into the heart of God. We can learn our need for salvation by grace and atonement for sin. Without an understanding of the principles of atonement and holiness found in Leviticus, much of the New Testament has no foundation on which to rest. Leviticus foreshadows the person and work of Christ. Leviticus prefigures Jesus Christ as our sacrifice for sin.

I. Title

A. Hebrew

The Hebrew title of the book is **וַיִּקְרָא** (*wayyiqra*) – the very first word of the Hebrew text, meaning "and he called."

¹ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 125.

B. Greek

The LXX entitled the book *Leuitikon*, an adjective which means “that which pertains to the Levites.” This is because the Levitical Priesthood plays such a prominent role in the book.

C. English

The Greek title was carried over into the Vulgate as *Leviticus* (or *Leviticum*) and subsequently came into the English Bible as “Leviticus.”

II. Author

We’ve discussed the majority of the authorship questions earlier in the semester, but I’m going to review some things here.

Basically, there three views: Moses, a post-exilic “P” source, and a pre-exilic source that is not Mosaic.

A. Moses

Leviticus is technically anonymous, but I believe Moses wrote it. See my notes on the authorship of the Pentateuch.

Moses is the chief recipient of God’s revelation in Leviticus. Elsewhere, we are told Moses wrote down revelation he received.

Exodus 24:4 (NASB): Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel.

The author of Leviticus was someone well acquainted with the events in the book, and he was knowledgeable of the Sinai Wilderness, making the author most likely a firsthand witness.² Moses fits this criterion.

² Kenneth Matthews and Tiberius Rata, “Leviticus Study Notes,” in *The Holman Christian Standard Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), 168.

B. The Documentary Hypothesis

1. Leviticus and the Documentary Hypothesis

Remember, advocates of the Documentary Hypothesis assign the whole of Leviticus to the “P” source. According to this theory, the P document was composed by one or more unknown Levitical priests sometime after the exile, circa 540 – 450 BC. Then around 450 – 400 BC, some other unknown person joined Leviticus with the other three sources or strands of material – J, E, & D. The resulting document was the Pentateuch as we know it. Advocates of the Documentary Hypothesis claim Leviticus fictitiously portrays the material as though it was revealed by god to Moses in order to give the contents of Leviticus an authoritative ring. Dr. Branch does not agree with this theory, but I expect you to know it. Remember, if the documentary hypothesis is true, that means the ancient sacrificial system, the Aaronic priesthood, and the tabernacle are nothing but a fabrication depicting practices of the post-exilic period as though they occurred during the second millennium BC, during the time of Moses.³

2. The Holiness Code

In 1877, German scholar August Klostermann (1837 – 1915) published an article in which he called Leviticus 18 – 26 Heiligkeitsgesetz, a German phrase that means “Holiness Code.”⁴ Building on the work of Graf, Klostermann claimed Leviticus 18 – 26 was an independent work, with its own distinctive literary features, written by Ezekiel early during the exile. Since then, most scholars include chapter 17 in the Holiness Code, so Leviticus chapters 17 – 26 are frequently identified as a source within the P source and called “Holiness Code,” or simply “H”. To summarize, most liberal scholars today work with the hypothesis that Leviticus 17 – 26 originally comprised an independent collection of some kind prior to being incorporated into the Torah by P.

³ Mark Rooker, “Leviticus, Book of,” in *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2003), 1030.

⁴ August Klostermann, “Ezechiel und das Heiligkeitsgesetz,” *Zeitschrift für die Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 38 (1877): 406 -455.

Mark Rooker refutes the liberal view and says, “On the negative side one recent area of investigation that has demonstrated the falsehood of this reconstruction is the history of the Hebrew language. Based on sound and testable methodology, it has been demonstrated that the main premise that Ezekiel preceded Leviticus has been demolished because Ezekiel’s language is of a later linguistic stratum than the language of Leviticus.”⁵

C. Pre-Exilic, but Not Moses

A third position is considered somewhat a mediating position between Mosaic authorship and the Documentary Hypothesis. This view maintains that the P source is pre-exilic in date but not Mosaic in origin. Arguments supporting this alternative are grounded in the similarities between the teachings of Leviticus and the books of Judges and Samuel.⁶

D. Conclusion

When all the evidence is considered, there is no compelling reason to reject Mosaic authorship. Here are some reasons why:

1. Moses is repeatedly and explicitly cited as the recipient of the revelations.
2. All the passages in the book assume a desert context.
3. Ezekiel’s extensive appeal to the legislation of Leviticus shows that the book *at least* precedes the Babylonian exile. *Ezekiel was basing his preaching on Leviticus: He didn’t write parts of Leviticus!*
4. Linguistic analysis of the so-called “P” source exhibits considerable discontinuity with other Biblical Hebrew texts from definitely identifiable, later chronological time periods.⁷ Actually, considerable similarities exist between the so-called J and P sources in sections of Genesis, suggesting stylistic differences in Biblical texts are determined more by the distinctiveness of literary genres than by assuming multiple authorship and the evolutionary development of written sources.

⁵ Rooker, “Leviticus, Book of,” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1030.

⁶ Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 127-128

⁷ Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 128

E. Date

Leviticus was written somewhere around 1445 BC. A comparison of Exodus 40:17 with Numbers 1:1 indicates the legislation found in Leviticus was given in its entirety during the first month of the second year after the Exodus from Egypt.⁸

III. Major Themes

A. Key Phrase

No other Biblical book emphasizes direct revelation more than Leviticus. No less than **thirty-eight** times is recorded that the “LORD spoke to Moses” or some comparable phrase. Moses probably recorded these things when he was on Mount Sinai.

B. Key Terms

The verb “to make atonement” (*kaphar*) occurs some forty-nine times; the noun form “atonement” (*kippurim*) occurs three times.

The various words translated “holy” (*qodesh, qadesh, qadosh*) occur well over one-hundred times in Leviticus.

The ideas of atonement and holiness are welded together in the book of Leviticus. Those who are redeemed by the blood are to live separated and holy lives, as 1 Peter 1:15 – 19 makes very clear.⁹

C. Focal Verses

Leviticus 11:44: For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth.

⁸ *The Believer's Study Bible*, W.A. Criswell, ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), 143.

⁹ *The Believer's Study Bible*, 144.

Leviticus 17:11: For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.

D. Underlying Principles of the Levitical Legislation

Atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche flippantly dismissed the notion of sin in the Bible, and especially in the OT law in the history of Israel. In *The Antichrist*, he said:

From a psychological point of view, 'sins' are indispensable in any society organized by priests: they [sins] are the actual levers of power, the priest lives on sins, he needs 'the commission of sins'. . . . Supreme law: "God forgives him who repents" –in plain language: who subjects himself to the priest.¹⁰

Nietzsche was a raving madman with disdain for all things holy. The notion of sin and atonement were not developed to empower the priesthood; sin is the reality of human experience and it separates man from God. Man's basic need is to be reconciled to God and atonement is essential for this to occur. The idea of atonement in Leviticus points us to the final atonement in Jesus' death on the cross.

I am following Gleason Archer here.

1. As a unique people of God, redeemed Israel is to (a) keep holy, that is, to set themselves apart from the unconverted world unto the service and worship of the one true God; (b) to maintain access to God on the basis of the substitutionary atonement, by means of the shedding of the blood of

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *Twilight of the Idols; The Antichrist*, R.J. Hollingdale, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1968, 1990), 150.

the sacrifice, as an innocent life is substituted for the forfeited life of the guilty.

2. Since this access to God is made possible by grace alone, the believer must come before God only in the specific way which God has appointed.
3. As a holy people spiritually wedded to Yahweh, Israel must rigorously abstain from all sexual unchastity, all violation of the marriage bond, and from contact with corruption and decay.
4. Nothing corrupt or liable to speedy decay may be presented as an offering to God.
5. The religious year is dominated by the sacred number seven (symbolizing the perfect work of God).

Every seventh day is a holy Sabbath.

Every seventh year is a Sabbath year of rest for crop-bearing land.

After seven sevens of years (49), the fiftieth year is to be hollowed as a jubilee.

Passover is held at the end of the second heptad of Abib, on the evening of the fourteenth.

The feast of Unleavened Bread is celebrated for seven days following Passover.

The Feast of Pentecost is celebrated after seven sevens (49) of days following the offering of the wave sheaf (hence, on the fiftieth day).

The seventh month, Tishri, is especially sanctified by three holy observances – The Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated for seven days, plus an eighth day for its final convocation.¹¹

Last updated June 20, 2020

¹¹ Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 259 – 260.