

THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

Sacrifices, Priesthood, Ritual Purity, Day of Atonement

Leviticus 1-16

INTRODUCTION

The name *Leviticus* comes from the Greek word *leutikos*, which means “pertaining to the Levites.” However, it was not only written for the priests, but also for all the people of Israel. It can be described as a “How to Worship” book or guidebook, providing various regulations for priests and people with respect to offering sacrifices, maintaining ritual purity, and living a life of holiness. The book of Leviticus is key in fully understanding the Old and New Testaments.

And if you look closely at your Bible, you will see that that Book of Leviticus stands at the very center of the Pentateuch (Law):

Genesis (Beginnings),

Exodus (Leaving Egypt, Covenant, Building the Tabernacle)

Leviticus (Worship and Service)

Numbers (Dedication of the Tabernacle, Desert Wanderings)

Deuteronomy (Epilogue).

According to tradition, the book was written by Moses, during the time that Israel encamped at Mount Sinai for a full year. Moses uses the phrase “and the Lord said to Moses” as many as thirty times, usually at the beginning of a chapter. Both Israel and the Church ascribe authorship to Moses.

The Book of Leviticus can be divided into the following seven sections:

1. The Five Sacrifices (Lev 1-7)
2. The Priesthood (Lev 8-10)
3. Ritual Purity (Lev 11-15)
4. The Day of Atonement (Lev 16)
5. Laws of Holiness (Lev 17-25)
6. Covenant Blessings and Curses (Lev 26)
7. Voluntary Dedications (Lev 27)

STUDY AND REFLECTION

The Five Sacrifices (Leviticus 1-7)

The Book of Leviticus begins with a description of five different types of sacrifices: whole burnt offerings, grain (cereal) offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings.

For the modern mind, it is difficult to understand the whole concept and animal and grain sacrifices. Why would the God of the Universe want all these sacrifices from the Israelites? What do they mean? Why are there so many?

Well, it is true. God had no need for them. However, the people did. They needed some way to express their desire to worship God, to give Him praise, thanksgiving, to atone for sins, and to surrender and self-offer themselves to God.

All the sacrifices have one basic thing in common – the act of self-offering, self-surrender, self-gift – in the form of a ritual. By placing his hand upon the head of the animal being sacrificed, the worshipper identified himself with the gift, and then symbolically offered himself to God.

Whole Burnt Offerings

A *whole burnt offering*, in which the whole gift is consumed with fire, is the first basic and most ancient form of sacrifice that goes back to the time of Abraham, Noah, and Abel (Gen 4:4). The purpose of this sacrifice was to worship God, to offer Him praise and thanksgiving, to atone for any sins committed, and to offer one's whole life to God as a total gift.

In Hebrew, the word for "burnt offering" is *'olah*, which literally means "ascending," because the entire animal "ascends" or "goes up" in smoke. In Greek, the word for "burnt offering" is *holocaust*, which means "burnt in its entirety." The Hebrew word emphasizes more the movement and offering upward, while the Greek word emphasizes more the fact that the offering is completely consumed by fire.

The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting (Tabernacle) said: "When any man brings an offering to the Lord," to be offered as a whole burnt offering, "you shall bring your offering from the herd (oxen) or from the flock (sheep or goats)" (Lev 1:2). Only domesticated animals could be offered, animals dependent upon people, who in turn are dependent upon them. To be acceptable, the gift must be a male, perfect, without blemish. Only the best is to be offered.

The person presenting the gift "shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (Lev 1:4). By laying his hand upon the head of the animal, the worshipper identifies himself with it.

The animal is then killed by the worshipper. The blood of the animal, which now symbolizes the life of the worshipper, is taken by the priests and thrown round the altar, which represents God. In this sacrificial ritual, the worshipper renews the gift of his whole life to God, in the spirit of worship, praise, thanksgiving, and atonement for sin.

The body of the animal was then cut into pieces and placed upon the wood that is on the fire upon the altar. "And the priest shall burn the whole on the altar, as a burnt offering to the Lord" (Lev 1:9, 13), "an offering by fire, a pleasing aroma to the Lord" (Lev 1:13). Nothing was eaten. Everything "ascended" to God. This expressed the desire of the worshipper to be a total self-gift to God and a "living sacrifice," offering everything to Him.

For those who were poor, who did not own their own herd or flock or could not afford to purchase an animal, an offering of turtledoves or young pigeons was acceptable (Lev 1:14). This is the kind of whole burnt offering that Mary and Joseph offered at the Temple in Jerusalem on the fortieth after the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:24).

Grain Offerings

A *grain offering* (in Hebrew *minhah*, which means “gift” or “tribute”) is the second basic and most ancient form of offering to God, which goes back to the time of Cain and Abel. Abel offered a sacrifice from his flock, and Cain offered from the “fruit of the ground” (Gen 4:3-5).

The purpose of this sacrifice was also offer to God worship, adoration, praise, and thanksgiving. Grain offerings were often made together with animal sacrifices.

The Lord said to Moses, “When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to the Lord, his offering shall be of *fine flour*; he shall pour oil (olive oil) upon it, and put frankincense on it, and bring it to Aaron’s son the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense; and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion upon the altar, and offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord. And what is left of the grain offering shall be Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the offerings by fire to the Lord” (Lev 2:1-2). The left-over flour was considered “most holy,” since it was consecrated to God. It was consumed by the priests only.

Instead of fine flour, it was acceptable to offer baked or cooked cakes of fine flour mixed with oil, or wafers spread with oil (Lev 2:4).

Grain offerings had to be pure, prepared without any leaven. Honey was also forbidden, because, like leaven, it was associated with foods that ferment (Lev 2:11, Ex 12:15). All offerings were seasoned with salt, a symbol of purity and sacrifice (Lev 2:13).

Note that in Israel, it was not believed that sacrifices satisfied the needs of the deity, as in pagan religions.

Peace Offerings

The third kind of sacrifice was the *Peace Offering* (in Hebrew, *shelamin*). The Hebrew word stems from the word *shalom*, which means “peace” or “wholeness.” The purpose of this sacrifice was to celebrate peace and communion with God.

The animal offered could be male or female, perfect, without blemish, from the herd of cattle or from the flock of sheep or goats. The worshipper placed his hand upon the head of the animal, then killed it. The priest then took the blood of the animal and threw it “against the altar” and “round about it” Lev (3:2,8,13). The blood symbolized the life of the person making the offering, and the altar represented God. The fat, which was believed to be the most precious part of the animal, was burned on the altar, together with the kidneys and the liver, and offered to God. The priest and the people ate the rest of the animal in a celebration feast of joy.

Peace offerings were always accompanied with grain offerings. If the peace offering was offered specifically in thanksgiving, cakes of leavened bread and unleavened bread could also be offered (Lev 7:13).

Since the peace offering was a communal meal with God, his priests, and his people, it always followed any other offering – whole burnt, sin or guilt. While sin and guilt offerings restored peace with God, the peace offering acknowledged and celebrated it. It was a sacrifice of joy and thanksgiving.

Sin Offerings

The fourth kind of sacrifice was the *Sin Offering*. The original Hebrew word here is *hattat*, which literally means “sin.” Hence the purpose of this sacrifice was to restore communion with God through the forgiveness of sins. If a person involuntarily or involuntarily committed a sin by transgressing one of the Lord’s commands or ordinances, the *sin offering* would purify and cleanse him. His sins would be forgiven.

If the high priest committed a sin and the trespass became known, he would offer a young bull without blemish as a sin offering. The high priest would lay his hand upon the head of the animal, identify himself with it, then kill the bull before the Lord. The high priest would then dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle part of the blood seven times before the Lord in front of the first veil of the Tent (at the entrance into the holy place). Then, some of the blood was placed on the horns of the altar of incense within the holy place. The rest of the blood of the bull was poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering (before the tent of meeting). All the fat, the kidneys, and the liver, were burnt on the altar. The skin of the bull and all its flesh, with its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung, along with the ashes from the altar, the whole bull was carried outside the camp to a clean place, where the ashes were poured out and everything else was burned on a fire of wood.

If the whole congregation of Israel committed a sin, and the trespass became known, the assembly of people would offer a young bull. The elders of the congregation would lay their hands upon the animal, identifying the people with it. The bull was killed and the priest would take some of the blood and sprinkle it seven times before the veil at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, and then enter the holy place, and place some of the blood on the horns of the altar of incense. The fat, the kidneys, and the liver, were burnt on the altar, and the rest of the animal was burned outside the camp. Any ashes left on the altar were removed and poured out outside the camp.

If a ruler (king, prince, leader) committed a sin, and the trespass became known, he would offer a goat, a male without blemish. He would lay his hand upon its head, to identify himself with it, and then kill it. The priest would take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering. The rest of the blood was poured out at the base of the altar.

If any of the common people committed a sin and the trespass became known, he would offer a female goat without blemish, or a female lamb without blemish (the sacrifice ritual would be same as for the ruler).

If the person could not afford a lamb, he brought an offering of two turtledoves or two young pigeons, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering.

If the person could not afford two turtledoves or two young pigeons, then he brought an offering of flour for a sin offering. No oil was placed on it, nor frankincense. The priest would burn a portion on the altar in atonement for the sin committed. The remained of the flour was reserved for the priest, as in the grain offerings.

Guilt Offerings

The fifth kind of sacrifice was the *Guilt Offering* (Hebrew *asham*). The purpose for this offering was also to restore communion with God through the forgiveness of sins. However, this offering was required of those who committed a sin that required restitution.

“Restitution” is defined as the restoration of something lost, broken, or stolen to its proper owner. It was also recompense for injury or loss. Guilt offerings were required for sins committed voluntarily and involuntary, where restitution was necessary. Animal and grain sacrifices offered to atone for the sins committed, together with restitution – the need to return, replace, restore, or compensate, with the addition of a fifth to it. The restitution guilt offerings are described in detail Leviticus 5:14 to 6:24.

The first three sacrifices – whole burnt offerings, grain offerings and peace offerings – were offered since the time of Noah. However, the sin and guilt offerings were introduced in the first time in history, after the Covenant at Sinai. The new way in which Israel was called to live, worship and to serve God, required ways to atone for any sins committed to receive God’s forgiveness.

The Priesthood (Leviticus 8-10)

Within the people of Israel, God chose one of the twelve tribes, the tribe of Levi, and set it apart for liturgical service at the Tent of Meeting. The ordination ritual consisted of several steps. Note that Moses serves as the supreme priest and prophet, performing the necessary actions to ordain Aaron and his son to the Old Testament priesthood.

1. *Washing with water.* “Moses said to the congregation, ‘This is the thing which the Lord has commanded to be done.’ And Moses brought Aaron and his sons and washed them with water.” (Lev 8:5-6).
2. *Vesting of Aaron, the high priest.* Moses vested Aaron in the white garment, and girded him with the cincture (girdle, sash), and clothed him with the blue robe, and put the ephod upon him. He placed the breast piece upon him and set upon his head. In front of the turban, he set the golden place, the holy crown, with the inscription “Holy to the Lord” (Lev 8:7-9).
3. *Anointing with the chrism.* Moses took the special anointing oil (chrism) and anointed and consecrated the Tabernacle and all that was in it. He poured some of the chrism on Aaron’s head, anointing and consecrating him. Moses brought Aaron’s sons, and clothed them with in their priestly garments: the white garment, the sash, and cap; and he anointed them (Ex 40:15).

4. *Ordination sacrifices.* Moses brought the bull of the *sin offering*; and Aaron and his sons laid their hands upon the head of the bull for the sin offering. Moses then killed the bull, took some of the blood with his finger, and put it on the horns of the altar, and poured out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar. He took the fat, the liver and two kidneys and burned them on the altar. The rest of the bull (its skin and flesh) was burned outside the camp.

Then he presented to Aaron the ram of *the burnt offering*; and Aaron and his sons placed their hands on the head of the ram. And Moses killed it and threw the blood upon the altar round about. When the ram was cut into pieces, Moses burned the entire animal upon the altars as a burnt offering, in worship of God.

Then Moses presented a second ram, the ram of ordination, *a peace offering*. Aaron and his sons lay their hands upon the head of the ram, and Moses killed it. He took some of the blood with his finger and put it on the tip of Aaron's right ear and on the thumb of his right hand and on the great toe of his right foot. He did the same to Aaron's sons. The fat, liver and kidneys were burned on the altar. Moses took one unleavened cake and offered it as a grain offering (Lev 8:14-31).

5. *Ordination banquet.* The meat from the peace offering was prepared, and Aaron and his sons sat down to eat in a celebration feast, which lasted seven days (Lev 8:31-35).

On the eighth day, Aaron began his priestly ministry on behalf of the entire community (Lev 9:1-24). At the end of the ritual offerings, when the final burnt offering was placed upon the altar, "fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat upon the altar; and when all the people saw it, they shouted, and fell on their faces" (Lev 9:24).

In the New Testament, in the words of the Apostle Peter, the initiation of a Christian into the Church makes him a member of a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9). Note the similarities between the Old Testament ordination and the New Testament initiation of a Christian into the Church.

1. *Washed in Holy Baptism.* The person is immersed into water three times, for the forgiveness of sins. He cleansed by the Holy Spirit.
2. *Vested.* The newly baptized person is clothed in a white garment, the "robe of light" and the "robe of righteousness."
3. *Anointed with Holy Chrism.* The person is anointed with holy chrism, consecrated to God, and seal with the gift of the Holy Spirit.
4. *Most Holy Eucharist.* Baptized and anointed with holy chrism, the person who participates in the Divine Liturgy, during which the perfect Sacrifice of Christ becomes present, His Death, Burial and Resurrection. In Holy Communion, the person partakes of the Holy Gifts, and receives the Risen Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God, "for the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting."

Ritual Purity: Clean and Unclean (Leviticus 11-15)

The whole concept of “clean” and “unclean” has nothing to do with sinfulness or holiness, moral purity, or impurity. Cleanliness or uncleanliness is a measure of ritual purity – what is suitable to be in the presence of God (i.e. the Tenting of Meeting), and what is not. Unclean things are not suitable to be in the divine presence, whereas clean things are.

Animals: Clean and Unclean (Leviticus 11)

Certain animals are deemed to be clean. They can be eaten and some of them are taken from the herd or flock to be offered in sacrifice at the Tent of Meeting. These animals are cloven-footed (the hoof is divided) and they chew cud. They include oxen, sheep, lambs, and goats. Any fish living in water with fins and scales is clean. Certain locusts, crickets and grasshoppers are clean.

Certain animals and living creatures are deemed unclean and are not to be eaten. They include the following: camels, swine (pigs), rabbits, badgers, eagles, vultures, ospreys, falcons, ravens, ostriches, hawks, sea gulls, owls, water hens, pelicans, storks, herons, bats, mice, rats, weasels, snakes, lizards, crocodiles, and most insects. The following creatures living in water are unclean: catfish, sharks, swordfish, sturgeon, eels, dolphins, otters, whales, seals, porpoises, octopus, squid, scallops, shrimp, crab, clams, crayfish, and lobster.

If a person ate an unclean creature or touched a dead carcass, he would become “ritually unclean,” and would need to undergo a process of purification.

Why were certain creatures declared to be “unclean”? The first reason is hygienic. “Unclean” creatures were bad for human health and prohibited by God to ensure the physical well-being of the Israelite people. Many of them were carriers of disease (i.e. mice, bats), parasites (i.e. pigs), and toxins (i.e. shellfish, bottom feeders). A second reason is religious and cultural. The “unclean” creatures were associated with Gentiles, their pagan religion and culture. To avoid eating them was to differentiate, “holy,” set apart from the other nations in the worship and service of God.

Human Beings: Clean and Unclean (Leviticus 12-15)

To enter the court of the Tabernacle (Tent of Meeting), a person needed to be ritually clean, healthy, and normal. Anyone “ritually unclean” was unsuitable to enter into the presence of God and needed to first undergo a process of purification or cleansing. Again, it is important to remember that clean or unclean has nothing to do with moral purity or impurity.

In most cases, the process of purification that restored a person to “ritual cleanliness” included the following:

- 1) a designated length of time (a day, seven days, forty days, 80 days);
- 2) bathing for purification (mikvah);
- 3) in cases (i.e. childbirth, contact with death), the offering of sacrifices.

A separate process and ritual were required for the purification of a person that had been healed of leprosy. This ceremony is outlined in Leviticus 14.

So, what made a person “ritually unclean”? The common thread for all cases is contact with death, or some kind of “loss of life”. An unclean person would contaminate anything or anyone he touched (Lev 11:24-38). The following is a list of situations that would render a person “unclean.”

1. *Contact.* A person would become unclean by touching a dead body or the carcass of a dead animal. Also, a person would become unclean by touching blood, or any person who was “unclean.”
2. *Childbirth.* The loss of blood and body fluids is a loss of “life” (Lev 12:1-8). Contact with blood would make the mother “ritually unclean.” After the days of purification are completed, a burnt offering and a sin offering would be offered to make the woman clean. Note that after completing her days of purification, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple, where two turtledoves or pigeons were offered to complete her ritual purification (Luke 2:22-24).
3. *Skin Diseases and Leprosy.* Loss of blood and body fluids from the skin or flesh was a loss of life (Lev 14:1-56). Anyone infected was “ritually unclean” and needed to be quarantined (set apart from the community). The cleansing ritual of a person healed of leprosy is outlined in Leviticus 14.
4. *Emission of Semen.* Loss of “seed,” which containing life, is a loss of life (Lev 15:1-12). Bodily discharges rendered a person unclean for a certain time.
5. *Menstruation.* Loss of blood is a loss of “life” (Lev 15:19-30). Bodily discharges rendered a woman unclean for a certain time.
6. *Marital Intercourse:* Loss of “seed” and the loss of body fluids is a loss of “life” (Lev 15:16-18); and would render a person unclean for a certain time.

The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16)

The *Day of Atonement*, also known as *Yom Kippur* (Lev 16), stands at the very center of the Book of Exodus, with the Laws or Ritual Purity on one side (Lev 11-15), and the Laws of Holiness on the other side (Lev 17-25).

A Holy Day

According to Leviticus 16:29), the Day of Atonement was to be observed every year, on the tenth day of the seventh lunar month (end of September, early October), five days before the Feast of Tabernacles. The rituals of this day both cleansed and re-consecrated the priests, the people, and the sanctuary.

The Day of Atonement was designated as a “sabbath of solemn rest” (Lev 16:30). No work was to be done, including food preparation. For all the people of Israel, it was a day of prayer and penance; a day of fasting, from evening to evening; and a day of abstinence for all physical work and sexual relations (Lev 16:19). The Day of Atonement became the most solemn day of the Israelite liturgical calendar.

The First Sin Offering

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would offer a bull as a *sin offering* “for himself and his house (i.e. for the priesthood)” (Lev 16:6, 11). He took some blood and sprinkled it with his finger seven times before veil of the Tent.

He then entered the holy place and placed some of the blood on the horns of the altar of incense. In this way, the altar of incense was purified.

After this had been done, the high priest took a censer full of coals of fire from the altar of incense and two handfuls of incense, and then he entered into the holy of holies, where he burned the incense on the fire before the Ark of the Covenant, so that the cloud of incense covered the mercy seat and filled the Holy of Holies.

Then, taking some blood from the bull that was sacrificed, he sprinkled it with his finger seven times upon and before the mercy seat, to atone for his own sins and the sins of the priesthood.

The Second Sin Offering

Two goats were chosen and brought before the door of the Tent of Meeting. The high priest would cast lots upon the two goats, “one for the Lord” and “one for Azazel” (an evil spirit or desert demon). The goat on which the lot fell for the Lord, would be presented as a sin offering. The goat on which the lot fell for Azazel would be sent into the wilderness to make atonement.

The goat chosen for a sin offering for the people was sacrificed by the high priest at the altar. He then brought some of the blood from the sacrificed animal into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled it upon and before the mercy seat. (This would be the second or third time the high priest entered the Holy of Holies).

Then the high priest took blood from the bull and goat and put it on the horns of the altar round about. He sprinkled some of the blood with his finger seven times, and cleanse and re-dedicate holy the altar of burnt offering. It is possible that the rest of the blood from the bull and goat were then poured out at the base of the altar.

The Scapegoat

Next, the live goat was presented. The high priest lay both his hands upon the head of the goat, and “confessed over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and their transgressions, all their sins” (Lev 16:21). This ritual symbolized the transfer of the people’s sins to the animal, which would then carry their sins off into the wilderness.

“The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land” and the man leading the goat would let it go free into the wilderness (Lev 16:22).

The Whole Burnt Offering

The high priest would then remove his linen garments, bath in water, put on his garments, and come to the altar of burnt offerings, where he would offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people (a ram).

Completion of the Sin Offerings

The fat from the sin offerings (bull and goat) were then burned on the altar. The bodies of these two animals (skin, flesh, dung) was carried outside the camp where it was burned in a clean place.

In this way, the priesthood, the people, and the sanctuary (Tent of Meeting) were purified and re-consecrated to God.

New Testament Connection

In the New Testament “Letter the Hebrews,” the rites of the Day of Atonement are described as being a prefigure or type, which are fulfilled in Christ, the true High Priest.

“But when Christ appeared as a High Priest of the good things to come... He entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but His own Blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of all heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Hebrews 9:11-14).

Jesus, the promised Messiah, became the perfect *Sin Offering*, sacrificed once and for all, for forgiveness of sins. He was also the chosen scapegoat upon whom all the sins of the world were placed, which He carried “outside the camp,” meaning outside the city of Jerusalem, where He became the atonement for all sin and transgression by His death on the cross.

At the same, Jesus, the promised Messiah, became the true and eternal High Priest. In His Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus, as God and man, entered heaven itself, the true Holy of Holies. Seated at the right hand of the Father, His Precious Blood continually intercedes in atonement on our behalf.

KEY VERSES

“Now the Lord called Moses, and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, When any man of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of cattle from the herd or from the flock’” (Lev 1:1-2)

“He shall offer it at the door of the Tent of Meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord; he shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him” (Lev 1:3-4).

“When one has become guilty, he shall restore what he took by robbery, or what he got by oppression, or the deposit which was committed to him, or the lost thing which he found, or anything about which he has sworn falsely; he shall restore it in full, and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to whom it belongs, on the day of his guilt offering” (Lev 6:4-5).

“Drink no wine nor strong drink, you nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting” (Lev 10:8).

“For I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44).