

ISRAEL'S CALL TO HOLINESS

Part One: Chapters 1-10

Note to small study groups. Because of the nature of this Book, you may want to consider reading the text prior to your meeting. In addition to the reflection questions offered in the articles, consider asking the question: What spoke to you most in the particular chapter(s) that you are studying.

If you are making your way through the Bible one book at a time you may come to a grinding halt after reading a chapter or two of Leviticus. You may conclude, as many others have, that it is just a “book of rules and regulations” that holds no relevance for our lives today. We may even wonder how this Book was included in the canon of the Old Testament.

While we may not immediately see the relevance of this Book for our lives, we should be open to the fact that the Book was very important to the Jewish people, and to learn the important message it holds for us.

The Book received its name from Levi, the priestly tribe whose male members were responsible for the worship life of the people of Israel. Leviticus is the main liturgical Book of the Bible, which holds a venerated place in Jewish tradition because of its rich laws that define Jewish life and practices. Of the 613 laws found in the Pentateuch, 247 are in Leviticus. When we speak of laws in the Pentateuch, we need to remember that they are understood as “teachings” or “instructions.” Psalm 119 beautifully expresses Israel’s love for God’s law: “Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk by the teaching of the Lord. Happy are those who observe God’s decrees.”

Historical background. On Mount Sinai, Israel received a new identity. The Israelites became a priestly people and a holy nation (Ex 19:6). In Ex 25:8, God told Moses to build him a sanctuary so that he could dwell in the midst of his new people. When the sanctuary was built, the glory of God filled it. This special presence of God raised the question of how Israel should worship their divine guest. The Book of Leviticus had the answer to the question. It contained guidelines for priests and laypeople concerning appropriate behavior in the presence of an all-holy God. The Book, being from the priestly tradition, its contents dealt with priestly matters of cult and law.

Pause: Have you read Leviticus prior to this study? If so, what was your impression of the Book? If you have not read it, what did you think the Book was about?

Call to holiness. Leviticus is all about Israel’s call to holiness. “You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy” (19:2). “Sanctify yourselves, then, and be holy; for I the Lord your God, am holy. Take care, therefore, to observe what I, the Lord, who make you holy, have prescribed” (20:7-8, also see 22:31-33).

If we were asked what it meant to live a holy life, we would probably say being prayerful, following God’s commandments, having concern for the poor. The editors of Leviticus would not agree more. As we make our way through this Book, we will come across verses stating that holiness involves the worship of God and caring for the poor.

The Book also spells out a host of other regulations about sacrifices, ritual purity and worship that may cause us to ask: What does all these rules have to do with becoming a holy people?

The word ‘holy’ literally means other, separate, distinctive. In relationship to God, the word holy means “totally other,” totally transcendent. When God told Moses that Israel must be holy like him (19:2), a big part of what he meant was that Israel must be *unlike* other nations who worshipped false gods. Chapter 18 opens with these words: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the Israelites and tell them: I, Lord, am your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you once lived, nor shall you do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you; do not conform to their customs. My decrees you shall carry out, and my statutes you shall take care to follow. I, the Lord, am your God. Keep, then, my statutes and decrees, for the man who carries them out will find life through them. I am the Lord’” (vv 1-5).

In Leviticus, we find a whole array of laws that taught a whole new way of worshiping God that was totally different from the way pagans worshiped God. The worship instructions were to be carefully followed for there was no holiness without obedience.

While the laws and regulations in Leviticus about sacrifices, ritual purity, etc., will not make much sense to us, they were very important and formative for a new people learning how to walk in holiness with their all-holy God. Finally, we must remember that the priestly editors of Leviticus make it clear that Israel’s call to holiness applied to *every* aspect of their lives, including their bedroom activities.

Authorship and date. While the Book covers the period starting from the time Moses journeyed with the Israelites in the desert, most scholars believe that its final editing did not occur until after the Babylonian exile, about 450 B.C.

Structure of the Book. Nearly all scholars divide Leviticus into two main parts, each of which has subdivisions.

COMMENTARY

PART ONE – CHAPTERS 1-16

- Laws governing five types of sacrifices (1-7)
- Ordination ceremony of Aaron and his sons (8-10)
- Laws governing ritual purity regarding animals, childbirth, leprosy and sexuality (11-15)
- Observance of the Day of Atonement (16)

PART TWO – CHAPTERS 17-26

The Holiness Code

- Moral and ethical laws of holiness (17-20)
- Ritual requirements for holiness (21-25)
- Blessings and curses for following and breaking the covenant (26)

Chapter 27, regarded as an appendix to the Book, was added on later to answer questions on how to redeem offerings vowed to God.

Pause: When you hear people say “so-and-so is holy,” what do you think they mean? In your opinion, what does it mean to be holy?

Chapters 1-7: Laws governing five types of sacrifices

Chapters 1-7 are a sort of a “manual for sacrifices” for priests whose full-time job was to look after the worship life of Israel.

Since the dawn of creation, people have felt a need to offer sacrifice to their god as a way to express their dependence on them or to placate them, to thank them for victory in times of war, and to be in communion with their god. We might say that the notion of sacrifice is in man’s bones.

In the life of Israel, directives regarding sacrifice came directly from God, as shown by the opening words in the Book of Leviticus: *The Lord called Moses, and from the meeting tent gave him this message: “Speak*

to the Israelites and tell them: ‘When any of you wishes to bring an animal offering to the Lord....’” (vv 1-2).

Because the Israelites were an agricultural people, it was to be expected that their offerings or sacrifices to their God would be animals and crops. In their relationship to God, the offering of various types of sacrifices were made for several purposes:

- to give thanks to God for the gift of life and to acknowledge him as the source of all life.
- to reconcile with God after sinning to be ritually clean. This prefigured the great sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, who gave his life so that sins would be forgiven. Christ’s sacrifice and priesthood would replace the sacrifice and priesthood of the Old Testament (see Heb 8-10).
- to commune with God, as when families and the community shared part of the meal offering to God. The word sacrifice means to “make holy.” In and through the offering of sacrifices, the people believed they were removing obstacles to holiness, and doing what helped them to become holy.
- most important of all, to submit *oneself* to God. What God wants most from us is a life wholly dedicated and obedient to him and his Word. Our *exterior sacrifices* are only good if accompanied by an *interior disposition* of giving our whole self to God.

As we now prepare to examine the first seven chapters of Leviticus, let us keep in mind that all the rules and regulations were a way to help Israel forge a new identity as God’s holy people, a way to divert themselves from all allegiance to the pagan ways of the Egyptians and their new neighbors in Canaan.

The regulations found in chapters 1-7 regarding sacrifices were used by the priests who led the daily worship that went on in these places:

- in the Tent of Meeting during the years Israel spent wandering in the desert.
- in the land of Canaan, once they took possession of the land.
- in the Temple of Jerusalem, when David made Jerusalem his capital city, and after his son Solomon had fulfilled David’s desire to build in it a “house of God.”

Pause: What is the biggest sacrifice you ever had to make? What was that experience like for you?

Chapter 1: The Holocausts

The first of five sacrifices mentioned in Lev 1-7 is “Holocaust,” a word meaning “wholly burned” or “burned offerings.” The purpose of the holocaust offering was threefold:

- to acknowledge God as the Lord of all life.
- to atone for one’s sins. Here, the offerer laid his hands on the head of the holocaust victim (v 4) to symbolize his total identification with the animal being offered. At that moment, the offerer transferred his sins to the holocaust offered to God in his name, doing so with a spirit of inner repentance.
- to dedicate one’s *whole* self to God. The total burning of the offering by the priest signified the offerer’s commitment to give himself totally to God and his ways.

The animal offered must be “without blemish,” i.e., without defects. Choosing perfect animals taught the people not to be sloppy or cheap in their worship of God. They were to offer only the best to their all-holy and all-good God. Birds or pigeons may be used as holocaust offering by those who could not afford a larger animal. We might say that the stewardship principle of “give as the Lord has given to you” was practiced in those ancient times.

A word about the term “blood” and the phrase “sweet-smelling oblation.”

Blood. The word blood is mentioned eighty-five times in Leviticus. Blood was seen as the principle of life and very sacred to God. Blood splashed on the altar was a symbol of giving one’s life to God and a particularly efficacious way to have one’s sins wiped away. The shedding of the blood of animals prefigured that moment in time when Jesus, the Lamb of God, would shed his blood for the sins of all humanity.

‘Sweet-smelling oblation’ (v 9). This phrase was used to indicate that the offering was pleasing to God (Paul uses the phrase in Eph. 5:3).

Pause: What was one of the biggest sacrifices someone made on your behalf? What was that experience like for you?

Chapter 2: Grain or cereal offering

Normally, the grain or cereal offering was presented as an act of thanksgiving for the harvest. It was an explicit way to recognize that all food came from God. Part of the grain offering was burned on the altar as a gift to God and the rest given to the priests to support them as they work full-time in the sanctuary.

Eating unleavened bread was a reminder to the people of their fleeing Egypt in a hurry. The use of *salt* (v 13) which kept food from spoiling was a symbol of the enduring nature of God’s covenant with Israel.

Chapter 3: Peace offering

Peace offering was used to give thanks to God and to maintain good fellowship between oneself, God and others. The main difference between the peace offering and the holocaust was that the animal for the peace offering was not completely burned. After offering the fatty part (considered the best part) to the Lord, the family or community shared the rest in a fellowship meal, deepening the relationship between God and the participants.

Chapters 4-5: Sin and guilt offerings

In his introduction to these two chapters, which deal with the fourth type of sacrifice, Wayne Turner in his *Collegeville Commentary* states:

“Chapters 4 and 5 exhibit an order that revolves not so much around the object of the sacrifice as around the disposition of the offerer. Sin and guilt are the subject matter, along with atonement for sin committed out of ignorance (4:1-35), out of omission (5:1-13), or by commission (5:14-26). These situations seem to cover the possible dispositions of the sinner and the offerings needed to atone for the situations (to make a person ‘at-one’ with God again) in the covenant relationship” (p.21).

In chapter 4, God gave Moses regulations for sacrifices that enabled the priest (4:1-12), the community (4:13-21), princes (4:22-26) and the private person (4:27-35) to deal with inadvertent or unintentional sins. Chapter 5 deals with some other special cases (e.g. disloyalty to a neighbor who had gotten himself into trouble by refusing to testify on his behalf in court; refusing to acknowledge that one had spoken a rash oath, etc.). These two chapters are intended to do two things:

- to make the Israelites (and us) aware of the seriousness of sin, even if unintentionally committed. Sin offends God and negatively impacts our relationship with others.
- to show God’s willingness to forgive sin if one *asked* for forgiveness and offered a sacrifice, even as little as a cupful of flour (5:11), as an outward sign of repentance. The refrain “*and he will be forgiven*” is repeated a few times in these two chapters.

Pause: What helps you to deal with guilt? How do you feel about doing forms of penance as a way to deal with guilt?

Chapters 6-7: Further instructions for the performance of sacrifices

Chapters 6 and 7 provide regulations that seem to have developed from questions on the practice of ritual sacrifices (detailed in the previous five chapters). Note that the headings in the *New American Bible* are the same as those in the first five chapters: holocaust, cereal offerings, sin and guilt offerings and peace offerings.

Chapters 8-10: Ceremony of Ordination

In their introduction to these chapters of Leviticus, the editors of *The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition* write:

Chapters 25-31 of Exodus gave instructions about religious ritual that are finally put into practice in these chapters of Leviticus. (The instructions for the building of the tent and ark had already been followed by the end of Exodus, but those regarding sacrifice and the consecration of priests are not implemented until now.) Chapter 8 details the installation of Aaron and his descendants as priests of Israel. Chapter 9 narrates the first sacrifice, and chapter 10 deals with infractions of the sacrificial rules.

All three chapters reinforce the message that sacrifices must be approached with deadly seriousness. Close attention to the details of ritual is absolutely necessary, for ritual improperly done will not bring the glory of the Lord into their midst. So serious is this requirement that two of Aaron’s sons are struck dead for failing to follow ceremonial rules and approaching God’s presence carelessly.

Priests are reminded always to distinguish between the sacred and profane, the clean and unclean. Among other ways, they are to do this by refraining from customs that show disrespect for God’s holiness such as improper dress, stepping outside the Tent of Meeting, and drinking alcoholic beverages” (p.77).

Some comments on parts of the text. Those looking for a more extended commentary on these chapters can refer to the resources mentioned at the end of article eleven.

In 8:10-11, Moses anointed the altar with oil. [When a bishop blesses a new church, he consecrates the altar with holy oil.] In 8:12, Moses anointed Aaron with oil. [Several of our sacraments involve anointing with holy oil.] In 9:7, Moses told Aaron to offer a sin offering and holocaust in atonement for his sins, and for the sins of his family and the community. [During the *Preparation of the Gifts* portion of the Mass, the priest washes his hands and privately prays: “Lord, wash away my iniquity and cleanse me of my sins.”] The Book of Leviticus stresses, amongst other things, how we should approach God with a clean heart, especially in the reception of the sacraments.

Chapter 10:1-5 mentions the death of Aaron’s two sons during their sacrifice ritual. When carrying out their roles, priests were expected to behave in a very proper and appropriate way. According to Verse 10:1, Aaron’s sons were consumed by the “profane fire” as they offered it to God. However, it does not say what made the fire profane or unholy. The point to remember is that ritual and worship of the Lord must be carried out with utmost seriousness and propriety.

In 10:16-20, Moses was mad with the two surviving sons of Aaron. Aaron went to bat for them and the issue was peacefully resolved.

Pause: Chapters 8-10 reinforce that worship of God is to be approached with seriousness. Have we in our parishes become a bit too relaxed and sloppy in our worship of God?