

The Old Testament: Part Six

Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy

In this article, we will introduce you to the last three books of the Pentateuch: Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

LEVITICUS - Israel's call to holiness

If you are making your way through the Bible book by book, your reading may come to a grinding halt when you come to Leviticus. While many of you may not be motivated to read this book, you should at least be aware of its purpose and importance in the life of Israel. The book holds a venerated place in Jewish tradition because it outlines ritual laws that are important for them if they are to be holy like their all-holy God and the rules that regulate their worship of God.

Generally speaking, the laws contained in this book serve to teach the Israelites that they should always keep themselves in a state of legal purity or external sanctity, as a sign of their intimate relationship with God. Hence, many of the rules and regulations have to do with cleanliness/uncleanliness. Once one makes oneself impure or unclean by certain actions, then one must follow certain stipulations in order to regain a state of purity and a state of right relationship with the people and with God.

Name and Date. The book takes its name from the tribe of Levi whose male members are responsible for the worship life of Israel. The book is said to have been given to Moses by God at the Tent Meeting at the foot of Mount Sinai (1:1) around 1250 BC, but it had actually been *written* over a long period of time, perhaps between 1,000BC and 600 BC.

Structure of the Book

- **Part One** lists the various kinds of offerings to be made to God. Different offerings fulfilled different functions (chs 1-7).
- **Part Two** describes the consecration or ordination of Aaron and his two sons (chs 8-10).
- **Part Three** spells out the many regulations to maintain purity in the community (chs 11-16).
- **Part Four** focuses on the Holiness Code, regarded as the most important part of the book. It stresses Israel's call to holiness.

Commentary. For a fuller commentary on the chapters of this book, see my *Commentaries* on the Books of the Old Testament, articles 9-10.

We will now look at a few sample texts in the book.

Chapter 1: Holocaust. 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 is threefold:

- ◆ To acknowledge God as the Lord of all life.
- ◆ To atone for one's sins. Here, the offerer lays 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 transfers 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 signifies the offerer's commitment to give himself totally to God and his ways.

Chapters 8-10: Ceremony of Ordination. In 8:10-11, Moses anoints the altar with oil. [When a bishop blesses a new church, he consecrates the altar with holy oil.] In 8:12, Moses tells Aaron to make 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.

Holiness and purity. The Israelites have a strong sense of God's holiness, his otherness, transcendence, and awesomeness. God's presence surrounds them everywhere. As a result, the Israelites are expected to have a strong sense of reverence for God, and especially to be ritually pure when they come to worship God. Chapters 11-15 look at four things that could make one ritually unclean: animals (ch.11), childbirth (ch.12), contagious diseases (chs 13-14), and sexual impurities (ch.15). Leviticus does not give any reasons *why* certain practices make one ritually unclean.

Chapter 16: Day of Atonement. Also known as Yom (Day) Kippur (Atonement), this day continues to be a most sacred feast in the Jewish liturgical year, when all seek God's forgiveness for the sins of the previous years.

Chapter 19: Holiness and care for the poor. This perhaps is the most important chapter in Leviticus. It stresses the Israelites' call to be holy like their holy God

(19:2) and the call to love their neighbor, the stranger and aliens (vv 11-37).

NUMBERS

The Book of Numbers is so named because it contains many numbers, including two censuses (chs 1 & 26) to determine the members of each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

What is the story? No sooner is the covenant at Sinai sealed, than the people start grumbling against the Lord. God punishes some, but Moses' prayers persuade God to spare the nation. Spies sent into the land of Canaan return with reports of giants and argue against invasion. Joshua and Caleb disagree, but the people refuse to move. Because of their lack of trust, God decides that no one from the generation that left Egypt will be allowed to enter the Promised Land. The "wandering" period begins and lasts until all adults who left Egypt have died in the desert (except Joshua and Caleb). God uses the pagan prophet Balaam to speak blessings on Israel as they prepare to enter the beautiful land of God's promise.

Division of chapters. Most Catholic scholars divide this book into three parts:

Part One: In the desert at Sinai—preparations for the journey (chs 1:1-10:10).

Part Two: Journey from Sinai to the plains of Moab (chs 10:11-21:35)

Part Three: Life and events in the plains of Moab—preparation for entry into the Promised Land (chs 22-36)

When did the events in this book take place? It was during the 38 years of Israel's wandering in the desert after they left Mount Sinai.

Note to reader. The first nine chapters of this book is a bit like Leviticus. If you wish to pick up the narrative section of the book, fast forward to chapter 10:10, where it describes Israel's departure from Sinai. For a commentary on chapters 1:1-10:9, see article 12 of my Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament on our website.

Chapters 11-21: Grumbling, pity parties, and rebellion against Moses' leadership. Between chapters 11 and 21, we will read of twelve accounts of Israel's grumbling and rebellion against God and his representative Moses.

The first story of rebellion gives us an example of the fourfold pattern of interaction (below) between God and the people, which we will see recurring in the upcoming chapters.

1. The people complain (v.1).
2. God becomes angry and punishes them (v.1).
3. The people come running to Moses for help and Moses intercedes on their behalf (v.2). The effectiveness of Moses' intercession is intended to show the importance of his leadership role.
4. God hears their prayer (v.1).

Chapter 13: Scouts are sent to reconnoiter the Promised Land. *"The spy story is one of the most elaborate narratives in the whole of Numbers. Its several scenes and dialogues are carefully constructed. Suspense, irony and dramatic dialogue give the reader a sense of the heightened importance of this narrative moment."* (Dennis Olson)

God tells Moses to *"send men to reconnoiter the land of Canaan that I am giving the Israelites"* (v.1). A leader from each of the twelve tribes sets out for Canaan on their spying mission and returns after forty days with their report.

The "spies" meet with Moses and Aaron in the presence of the whole community to report on the situation in Canaan (vv 25-33).

The majority report (vv 27-29) confirms that the land is indeed good and flowing with milk and honey, that the cities are well fortified, and that the people who live there are big and fierce.

The minority report given by one of the twelve leaders, Caleb, is a simple affirmation of confidence in God: *"We ought to go up and seize the land, for we can certainly do so"* (v. 30).

The majority group, despite its positive report, rejects Caleb's recommendation, saying: *"We cannot attack these people; they are too strong for us. ...The land we explored consumes its inhabitants. And all the people we saw are huge men, veritable giants..."* (vv 31-33).

This is the tenth time the people have rebelled against the Lord. As a result, God sentences them to die in the wilderness so no one from the generation that left Egypt will enter the Promised Land, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua (14:23).

Chapter 20:6-12—Moses' disobedience means he will not lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. In these verses, God orders Moses to speak to the rock, and water will come forth from it (v.8). Instead, Moses in anger, and perhaps with a *lack of trust in God*, strikes the rock not once but twice. For his public act of disobedience, Moses is told that he shall not lead the Israelites into the land that God will give them.

We may wonder if the punishment was too severe for a man who had been God's faithful foot soldier for so many years. A footnote in *Life Application Study Bible* reads: "*Moses was the leader and model for the entire nation. Because of this great responsibility to the people, he could not be let off lightly. By striking the rock, Moses disobeyed God's direct command and dishonored God in the presence of his people*" (p.234). Judaism teaches that the greater the person, the stricter the standard of judgment.

Chapters 22-24: A pagan king hires a pagan prophet to curse Israel. These chapters tell how the King of Moab hires a pagan prophet called Balaam to curse Israel. But Balaam is prevented by God from cursing his people. In one of these stories, Balaam's donkey is used by God to stop Balaam's path (22:28-35). Finally, Balaam tells the frustrated King of Moab that he cannot curse what God has not cursed (23:8).

Chapter 27:15-22. God orders Moses to commission Joshua as his successor. These last three chapters of Numbers consist of laws and instructions from God for the people to follow when they enter into Canaan. It is an indication that the conquest of Canaan is near at hand.

DEUTERONOMY

The word Deuteronomy means "second law" which is a bit misleading since the book is a reiteration and expansion of the first law given to Moses at Mount Sinai.

Historical setting. It would appear that this book of the Bible was written as a series of sermons given by Moses before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, but in actual fact, like the other books of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy had been written over a long period of time as a tribute to Israel's great teacher and legislator. In Israel's history, the book was used at different periods to speak to different audiences.

Structure. The book is divided into three sermons: First Sermon (1:1-4:43), Second Sermon (4:44-28:69), and Third Sermon (chs 29-32), and concludes with Moses' last will and testament (chs 33-34). It is important to note that this book is frequently quoted in the New Testament, most notably by Jesus when he uses Scripture to defend himself against Satan in the desert.

Suggested passages to read

As in the two previous books, Deuteronomy contains many chapters on laws that will not interest us. But I do recommend that you consider reading the following passages:

4:25-40. In these verses, God through Moses, stresses the importance of a) remaining faithful to the commandments; b) teaching their children about God's intervention in Israel's history; and c) reflecting on God's goodness to Israel. (Horeb is another name for Sinai.)

5:6-21. The Ten Commandments

Chapter 6. This is perhaps the most beautiful chapter of this book. It speaks again of the importance of teaching God's law to the next generation. It contains the great commandment about love and reiterates the importance of *never forgetting* God's goodness to Israel. This latter point is also strongly underlined in 8:14-20.

11:18-32. The rewards of fidelity.

30:11-20. The closeness of God's word Israel's choice. These are some of the most important verses in the Bible.

31:1-22. The call and commissioning of Joshua

34:1-12. Death and burial of Moses