

## LEVITICUS – LEVEL ONE

If you are a new or fairly new reader of the Old Testament, you may want to consider reading Leviticus at a later date. The Book of Leviticus consists in large part of very detailed regulations on worship, ritual cleanness and priestly matters, which governed the worship life of Israel, regulations that hold little or no relevance for our lives today. Having said that, it might be interesting and helpful to know how the book came to be.

On Mount Sinai, Israel receives a new identity. The Israelites become a priestly people and a holy nation (Ex 19:6). In Ex 25:8, God tells Moses to build him a sanctuary so that he can dwell in the midst of his new people. When the sanctuary is built, the glory of God fills it. This special presence of God then raises the question of how Israel should worship their divine guest. The Book of Leviticus contains the answer. Found therein are detailed guidelines for priests and laypeople as to what is and is not appropriate behavior in the presence of an all-holy God.

Leviticus 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.

**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 means 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 agree. 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 do 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 worshiped 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 an array of laws that taught a whole new way of worshiping God which 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.

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

### **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.

### **Suggested text to read**

**Chapter 16-** The Day of Atonement, also known as Yom (Day) Kippur (Atonement), the most sacred festival of the year in the worship life of Israel.

**Chapter 19**—Israel's call to holiness which involves worshiping God alone (no false gods) and treating others and their property in a loving way.