

Bible Study Appendix

Leviticus

by The Reverend Gary Demarest

Whatever else may be said about the current status of Leviticus, it is widely neglected and frequently misused or abused. An example of our neglect is found in the *Book of Common Worship*. In the three-year cycle of the lectionary, only one passage from Leviticus is used—twelve verses from Chapter 19—which we will use for this study.

This neglect of Leviticus stands in sharp contrast to its place in the history of the Hebrew community. For centuries, Jewish children began their education at age three with the memorization of Leviticus. Nearly forty percent of the Talmud bases its guidelines for life and worship upon texts from Leviticus. By the time of Jesus, 247 of the 613 commandments affirmed by rabbinic Judaism are found in Leviticus.

When not neglected, Leviticus is frequently abused or ridiculed. Texts of Leviticus are often quoted entirely out of context to establish a statement of absolute truth. Or, worse, a practice such as requiring the death penalty for both parties in an adulterous act is used to question the validity of the whole book.

All of this points to a basic problem that may be at the root of our current conflicts that called for the creation of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. Continuing neglect and misuse of Leviticus must be challenged and corrected. A starting point is Douglas John Hall's urging that we refer to our Scriptures as "Older" and "Newer" Testaments, rather than Old and New, particularly in a culture that regards what is old with suspicion or rejection.

Engaging the gospel in the writings of the Newer Testament requires knowledge of the meanings of sacrifice and atonement, of law and grace, of sin and obedience. Even the meanings and practices of the priesthood, tabernacle, and, later, Temple are essential to our understanding the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Leviticus lays the foundation upon which Christian worship and practice must be built.

Eugene Peterson has translated the Bible in contemporary language, published as *The Message*. In his introduction to Leviticus, he states:

Because the core of all living is God, and God is a holy God, we require much teaching and long training for living in response to God as he is and not as we want him to be.... Leviticus is a start at the "much teaching and long training" that continues to be adapted and reworked in every country and culture where God is forming a saved people to live as he created them to live—holy as God is holy. (*The Message*, p. 174)

Overview

Before we attempt some textual work in Leviticus, it is important to gain a basic overview of the entire book, beginning with its title.

“Leviticus” was never used on an ancient scroll. It would not have been recognized by anyone in ancient Israel. In the Hebrew Bible, the title of the book is “Wayyiqra,” the first word of the opening sentence, which means, “Now the Lord called.”

The English title “Leviticus” came to us by way of the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate translations. This English title may well lie at the root of some of our negativism about the book, for it suggests that it might be little more than a manual for those engaged in the Levitical priesthood, not likely to be regarded as relevant to us today.

Chapters 1–10

Indeed, the first ten chapters confirm this impression from the English title. Here are descriptions of the five major offerings around which their worship year was ordered—the burnt offering, the grain offering, the peace offering, the sin offering, and the guilt offering (Chapters 1–7), followed by instructions to the priests (Chapters 8–10).

An acquaintance with Exodus 25–40 is essential to our entry into Leviticus. In one sense, Leviticus 8 may be regarded as a continuation of the narrative in Exodus 40.

Two things are important to remember in studying and teaching this section. First, we must avoid interpreting the text either as a record of a particular stage of development in the life of Israel or as a mandate for the structure of worship for all of God’s people in all times and places. Second, we need to keep in mind that the great themes of the Bible center in God’s redemptive work in human history, forming a people who would know and do the will of God. Central to the life of this people is the practice of communal worship that praises and honors God, that mediates the forgiveness of sin, and through which they could, and would, live in harmony with God and each other.

The central message of Leviticus has everything to do with the peace, unity, and purity of the people of God.

We can’t leave the first ten chapters of Leviticus without fast-forwarding to the Letter to the Hebrews in the Newer Testament. Chapters 5–10 make the connections between the sacrifices and the priesthood with the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Hebrews may well be said to be our primary commentary on Leviticus.

The opening chapters of Leviticus establish the reality and seriousness of sin. Sin is universal and pervasive—no one is without sin before God. The place of worship must be cleansed before God can be worshiped. The priests and their garments must be cleansed, as well as the people, to enter God’s presence and experience communion with God and each other.

Here is the framework for the meaning of the life of Jesus as our eternal high priest. Here is the meaning of the death of Jesus as the one, full, and final sacrifice and atonement for sin for all people and for all time. The resurrection of Jesus is God’s final affirmation of

forgiveness and mercy. No one theory of atonement contains the full meaning of Christ's sacrificial death.

These chapters of Leviticus also establish the central place of corporate worship for the people of God. The application of these Scriptures must take different forms in different times and places, and this has never been easy.

The expectations of people who join us in worship are strongly shaped by the entertainment models of our culture. We are under pressure to provide an experience that will make people feel good about themselves. The fact that we have coined the phrase "worship wars" is a sad commentary on our confusion.

We are not without help, however. The six essential elements of worship in Chapter II of our Directory for Worship (*Book of Order*), and the expansive resources for ordering worship in Chapter III, provide a wide range of ideas and practices for dynamic worship with integrity.

Chapters 11–15

This section is commonly called the Purity Code, which is a misleading title. These chapters bring us into a world not only different from ours, but one in which we are most likely to be uncomfortable. Here we deal with matters ranging from what may or may not be eaten to what is to be done with normal and abnormal secretions from male and female genitals, including an extended section on the treatment of skin diseases and the cleansing of contaminated dwellings.

It's not likely that you will base a children's sermon or lesson on any of these texts, much less a pastoral prayer, but it is unworthy of biblical scholarship to ignore or belittle them.

The key to living with these chapters is found in 11:44–45: "You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy," repeated three other times in Leviticus (19:2; 20:7; and 20:26). One hears this echoed by Jesus: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

Without attempting to engage the complex issues of this section, the underlying theme is the distinction between what is clean and what is unclean. Obviously, some health issues were involved, but this is more than a treatment of sanitation.

Some of the lines we draw between clean and unclean are different from theirs, but we must draw them nonetheless. Mary Douglas, who has written widely on these themes, suggests that the concept of uncleanness is somewhat akin to our concept of dirt. We're not likely to put a pile of it in our living room, not because dirt is evil, but because it is out of place.

The word purity is crucial here. Some have suggested that our task force is more likely to be concerned about unity than purity. To some, purity seems to mean getting rid of

whatever they regard as unclean. That is often established by quoting a particular part of Scripture without engaging in a serious study of the text itself, along with other texts of Scripture, particularly face-to-face with people who hold differing interpretations.

In the recently published commentary on Leviticus, found in the series *The Bible Speaks Today*, (InterVarsity Press), David deSilva is quoted as explaining that purity codes “are a way of talking about what is proper for a certain place and a certain time (however the society fills in the context). Pollution is a label attached to whatever is out of place with regard to society’s view of an orderly and safe world” (*Leviticus*, Tidball, p.143).

Some have attempted to distinguish in these chapters between dietary, ceremonial, and moral codes, assigning the dietary and ceremonial ones to previous times. Leviticus does not lend itself to this kind of reductionism.

Chapter 16

Between the so-called Purity Code and Holiness Code is Chapter 16, the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur—referred to by many in Israel as “The Day.”

Scholarly debate will continue as to whether The Day as recorded here could have matured into its fullness until after the return from the exile of the sixth century, but the reality is that this continues to be the day of supreme importance in the life of Israel, well beyond the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

The Day of Atonement is a dramatic statement of God’s forgiving love by grace alone. Any suggestion that salvation in the Older Testament is by works is disallowed by Leviticus 16. In the periods of both Testaments, salvation is a gift provided by God, not a human achievement.

The highlight of the day was the scapegoat—the goat sent out into the wilderness bearing all of the sins of the people over the past year—never to return. Can you imagine what it must have felt like to watch that goat, and your sins, disappear?

It is enigmatic that the Newer Testament writers made no direct reference to the scapegoat ritual. Not until the Epistle of Barnabas (c.130 AD) was this theme developed in the Christian community.

Again, this section must be read with the Letter to the Hebrews as a commentary. You will appreciate anew the central affirmation of the Reformed tradition: “the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love” (*Book of Order*, G-2.0500a).

The good news of the gospel is that the sacrifice does not have to be repeated again and again. The fact that the ritual had to be repeated annually attested to its inadequacy. The writer of Hebrews emphasized this:

Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it has been appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Heb. 9:25–28)

Chapters 17–26

The last ten chapters of Leviticus are often referred to as the Holiness Code, again a misleading title.

In recent correspondence, a friend I hold in high esteem, who is an attorney and a theologian, shared some insights about this section of Leviticus that I find helpful:

This terminology (Holiness Code) is misleading. Hebrew legal reflection does not function with the same precision of a modern “code.” Nor does it operate through the generalizations of a Constitution. The Levitical law is much more particularized than a constitutional document. This is an extremely important interpretive point. Levitical law is closer to our Anglo-American case law, which is to say it is always subject to interpretation, to exceptions, to the reflective act of distinguishing one case from another. Every law has value as precedent . . . Some have few, if any, exceptions, but most precedents are subject to being distinguished when new and different circumstances present themselves.

Seldom does anyone deal with this passage as a whole in our current conflicts surrounding human sexuality in general and same-sex affection in particular. Most of the focus is upon the two passages dealing with these subjects in Leviticus 18 and 20, with particular efforts to use them to buttress particular positions.

The central themes of Leviticus are the holiness of God, the holiness in worship, and the holiness in living. God invites men and women to walk in obedience to him with love and care for each other. Some commentators suggest that Leviticus 1–16 is an expression of what it means to “love the Lord your God,” and 17–26 is an expression of what it means to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Leviticus addresses every subject we have considered on our journey together on this task force. This part of Scripture was not written as a manual of operations for the church in the 21st century, nor is it merely an interesting piece of ancient history.

Now we are ready to study a text from Leviticus, as we continue to wrestle with the meaning of the peace, unity, and purity of the church. We will look at the only Leviticus passage in the three-year lectionary readings—Lev. 19:1–2, 9–16.

Bible Study

Read Lev. 19:1–2, 9–16 aloud.

Very near this passage can be said to be the heart of Leviticus and perhaps all of Scripture: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:18).

Jesus’ summary of the Law is well known, combining Deut. 6:5 and Lev.19:18: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

Leviticus 19 engages each of the Ten Commandments, with the exception of the first, which is assumed as the basis for all faith and life. The lectionary, significantly, uses Matt. 5:43–48 and 1 Cor. 3:10–11, 16–23 as the Gospel and epistle readings with this Leviticus passage. **Read Matt. 5:43–48 and 1 Cor. 3:10–11, 16–23.**

Questions for discussion and reflection

- How do you view the role of the Law? (Martin Luther’s two roles of the Law: a schoolmaster to bring us all into account, and a restraint of evil; Calvin’s role of the Law—a guide to obedient discipleship)
- What tensions have you experienced in this process of adapting and reworking Scriptures such as Leviticus into daily living?
- You might want to do a study of parallels between Lev. 19 and James (suggested by Luke Timothy Johnson):

Lev. 19:12 and James 5:12

Lev. 19:13 and James 5:4

Lev. 19:15 and James 2:1, 9

Lev. 19:16 and James 4:11

Lev. 19:17 and James 5:20

Lev. 19:18 and James 2:8

Contemporary non-technical commentaries:

Demarest, Gary. “Leviticus,” *The Preacher’s Commentary*. Nelson, 1990.

Tidball, Derek. “Leviticus,” *The Bible Speaks Today*. Intervarsity Press, 2005.

Postscript

The process of adapting and reworking the texts of ancient Scripture into contemporary application is a never-ending and often highly conflicted process, capable of bringing out the best and the worst in us.

In his inaugural address as president of Fuller Theological Seminary in 1954, Dr. Edward John Carnell called the seminary “to inculcate on its students an attitude of tolerance and forgiveness toward individuals whose doctrinal convictions are at variance with those that inhere in the institution itself.” He developed this thesis on the grounds of the passage in Lev. 19, “to love our neighbor as ourselves.” Observing that a failure to develop a Christian philosophy of tolerance reflected a truncated grasp of Christianity itself, he stated, “One of the purposes in the giving of the law was to provide a final reason why humility must overlay the whole of life.”

Carnell’s plea for tolerance of opposing viewpoints deserves a hearing not yet widely granted. Such a philosophy of tolerance, he argued, could result in “vengeance and intolerance” yielding to “patience and understanding” with no diminution of conviction nor integrity. Such a view of loving one’s neighbor “takes in the sanctity of another and wishes for it nothing but good.”