

Introduction to Leviticus

I. Significance

- A. There are numerous other books that a Christian might think would be more profitable to study than the book of Leviticus. Very little of its setting and content seems to fit the 21st century life of a NT Christian.
- B. Even for believers intent on reading through the Bible, their endeavor is often abandoned once they weigh into the thick of the sacrificial system, the priesthood, and copious laws on bodily discharges and restricting dietary laws.
- C. Every reader of Leviticus has had (most likely) this timid yet honest thought: “Is any of this of real benefit to me?”
- D. In this way, Leviticus could be called “the most neglected of the neglected biblical books” (Balentine, 1-2)
- E. Interestingly, the same book that causes confusion and consternation for Christians was recognized as one of the most important books for God’s people—so much so that Jewish children traditionally began their biblical studies with Leviticus (Rooker, 22).
- F. They saw this book as a source of great joy, for it explained to them in detail how God had made it possible for his people to have fellowship with him.
- G. Consider some of the accolades given to the book of Leviticus:
 1. “Genesis is the book of beginnings, Exodus the book of redemption, and Leviticus the book of atonement and a holy walk. In Genesis we see man ruined; in Exodus, man redeemed, in Leviticus, man cleansed, worshiping and serving” (Unger, 85).
 2. “Leviticus is thus a work of towering spirituality, which through the various sacrificial rituals points the reader unerringly to the atoning death of Jesus, our great High Priest. An eminent nineteenth-century writer once described Leviticus quite correctly as the seed-bed of New Testament theology, for in this book is to be found the basis of Christian faith and doctrine. The Epistle to the Hebrews expounds Leviticus in this connection, and therefore merits careful study in its own right, since in the view of the present writer it is preeminent as a commentary on Leviticus” (Harrison, 9).
 3. “At no point, for many Christians, does the Bible appear more mysterious and seemingly irrelevant than when it focuses on the temple and the sacrificial system. But the truths found in these texts and what they foreshadow must be grasped if the New Testament teaching is to be understood. According to Knight, this temptation to ignore Leviticus was even true of our Savior’s experience: ‘One of the satanic temptations Jesus underwent at the beginning of his ministry was to accept the innuendo that his task was merely to preach the Gospel, heal the sick, feed the hungry, but at the same time to turn his back on the book of Leviticus.’ It behooves the New Testament believer to give more attention to this book, for we base our eternal destinies on the one of whom Leviticus loudly speaks” (Rooker, 22).

- H. Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 rings especially true for our question on the significance of Leviticus. All Scripture—Leviticus included—is breathed out by God, and therefore its content, message, and details are profitable to equip believers for every good work.
1. Leviticus teaches us about the nature and character of God.
 2. Leviticus uncovers the reality of sin and its necessary consequences.
 3. Leviticus foreshadows the atoning and high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ.
 4. Leviticus teaches us the necessity of holiness in every area of life.
 5. Leviticus teaches us how to live righteously by contemplating the principles (i.e., "spirit") of the law and its implications for how we are to love God and our neighbor.
- I. The NT contains several important references to Leviticus.
1. Leviticus 18:5: "So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am Yahweh," is referenced in Luke 10:28, Romans 10:5, and Galatians 3:12.
 2. Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of the your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am Yahweh," is referenced in Matthew 19:19, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, and James 2:8.
 3. Leviticus 19:2, "Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I Yahweh your God am holy,'" is quoted in 1 Peter 1:16. Likewise, Jesus' words in Matthew 5:48, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" is most likely an allusion to this passage as well.

II. Title

A. English/Greek Title

1. The English title is derived from the Latin Vulgate, which in turn is a translation of the title from the Greek Septuagint (LXX).
2. The Greek title *Leuitikon* (Λευιτικόν) means "Levitical" or "that which pertains to the Levites." This seems to align with the traditional Jewish title for the book as found in Syria Peshitta and other rabbinical works: "The Book of Priests."
3. The title reflects the overall posture of the book as a reference manual for the Levitical priests. And indeed, much of what is written concerns the details of priestly service, although the majority of these instructions pertain specifically to Aaron and his sons rather than to the Levites as a whole. Thus the title is not completely without merit.
4. "It would be wrong, however, to describe Leviticus simply as a manual for priests. It is equally, if not more, concerned with the part the laity should play in worship. Many of the regulations explain what the layman should sacrifice. They tell him when to go to the sanctuary, what to bring, and what he may expect the priest to do when he

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arrives. Most of the laws apply to all Israel: only a few sections specifically concern the priests alone, e.g., chs. 21-22” (Wenham, 3).

B. Hebrew Title

1. The Hebrew title which appears in the Masoretic Text (MT) is *Wayyiqra'* (וַיִּקְרָא), “and he called,” which is the first word of the book.
2. This title is in keeping with the other books of the Pentateuch and reflects a common Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) literary practice.
3. While the title lacks thematic nuance, it underscores the relationship of the book to the overall literary context of the Torah. Leviticus is not an isolated literary work. Rather, it must be understood as it relates to what precedes (Exodus) and follows (Numbers).

III. Authorship and Date

A. Traditional View

1. Traditionally, the book of Leviticus (along with the rest of the Pentateuch) has been regarded as the work of Moses.
2. This was the prevailing view of Jewish and Christian interpreters for much of history.

B. Rise of the Documentary Hypothesis (DH)

1. After the rise of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, deistic philosophy began permeating biblical scholarship, leading critical scholars to question Mosaic authorship.
2. Wellhausen’s *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1878) codified the critical approach to Pentateuchal studies by suggesting that the Pentateuch was not a unified work at all, but rather the product of a variety of literary sources that had been edited together late in Israel’s history.
3. According to Wellhausen and subsequent critical scholarship, the Pentateuch was comprised of at least four distinct sources: J, E, D, and P.
4. These four major sources were then weaved together into an elaborate tapestry, with threads of P imbedded throughout the extended narratives of J and E, yet heavily concentrated in Leviticus.

Source	Date	Characteristics
J	ca. 850 B.C.	Marked by the use of the divine name Yahweh (i.e., Jehovah), J represented an early stage of Israelite religion. It tends to describe God in human terms and expresses religion with little formality (e.g., priests, sacrifices, temple).
E	ca. 750 B.C.	Marked by the use of the divine title Elohim, E tends to express divine/human interactions in the mode of dreams and visions. It portrays God as more transcendent than in J, and seems to show more concern for ethical issues. Yet it also contains little religious formality.
D	ca. 621 B.C.	Equated with Deuteronomy, and thought to have originated at the end of Josiah's religious reforms.
P	ca. 430 B.C.	Called the Priestly Code, it contains most of the material in the Pentateuch pertaining to priesthood and sacrifices. It is the latest of the sources (postexilic) and portrays God as an absolutely transcendent deity who must be approached with sacrifice through priestly mediation.

5. Additionally, critical scholars have suggested that Leviticus is actually comprised of two sources. Chapters 1-16 is from source P (i.e., the Priestly Tradition) and chapters 17-26 were added to it from source H (i.e., the Holiness Code).
 - a) According to this perspective, the purpose of P was to reorganize postexilic Judah as a theocracy by stirring up zeal for the temple, its rituals, and its priesthood.
 - b) The H section was appended to it as a way of further elucidating and reinforcing the laws contained in P.

6. Why then, does the book of Leviticus appear to claim Mosaic authorship and antiquity? In a word: divine authority:
 - a) "Legal material predominates in P, but it is interspersed with narrative that supports the laws. These laws, ostensibly used in the past at a particular period, had their real significance for the postexilic audience and were designed to be authoritative. Earlier critics argue that P, although a product of the exilic community, projected its material back into the past to present it as having been given by God in remote antiquity at Sinai" (Ross, 36).
 - b) "Leviticus reflects the very last stage of the religion of Israel in the Old Testament period. To give the contents of Leviticus an authoritative ring, however, P fictitiously portrays the material as though it was revealed by God to Moses. Thus, the ancient sacrificial system, the Aaronic priesthood, and the tabernacle are nothing but a fabrication depicting practices of the postexilic period as though they occurred in the second millennium B.C., during the time of Moses" (Rooker, 24).

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7. Arguments for the Documentary Hypothesis (DH)

a) Distinct uses of divine names

- (1) **Argument:** The alternation of Yahweh and Elohim (e.g., Gen 1 & 2) in Pentateuchal narratives suggests independent sources that have been pieced together. It is highly unlikely that Israel would use several names for their god. The very existence of different names indicates different religious traditions.
- (2) **Response:** ANE studies have demonstrated that it was very common for deities to be called by different names. But more than that, the use of Yahweh and Elohim (and even Adonai) are contextual and semantic decisions. These names had theological significance and were employed with these semantic intentions in mind.

b) Duplications of singular incidents

- (1) **Argument:** The assumption is that no author would consciously record the same incident twice. Since the Pentateuch contains a number of duplicated (or even triplicated) incidents, the conclusion is that these passages reflect the same event as recorded by multiple sources. Examples include the duplication of the creation narrative (Gen 1 & 2), Sarah in Egypt (Gen 12:10-20) and Gerar (Gen 20), and Rebekah in Gerar (26:7-11).
- (2) **Response:** The details in these accounts are far greater than critics are willing to admit. While they may appear to be similar situations, the differences indicate they are different events. Studies have confirmed that such doublet and triplet stories are regular features of single-source traditions in ANE writings.

c) Contradictions in multiple accounts

- (1) **Argument:** Conflicts in details over the same event are indicative of multiple sources. Since no writer would write contradictory accounts of events, when these appear in the text, it indicates that two different accounts of a singular event have been combined. Examples include Genesis 1-2 and 6-9.
- (2) **Response:** Contradiction is in the eye of the beholder. Contradiction may just as easily be explained as complementary, with harmonizing (rather than conflicting) details. Genesis 1 & 2 don't represent conflicting accounts, but complementary accounts, the latter being a detailed narrative of events which were only briefly addressed in the former. Additionally, repetition appears to be a key feature of Semitic literature as well as ANE writings as a whole.

d) Variations in Language and Style

- (1) **Argument:** Certain key terms, themes, and linguistic characteristics indicate material from multiple documentary sources. If one writer were responsible for the whole of the Pentateuch, we would naturally expect a continuity in style, language, and vocabulary.

- (2) **Response:** This type of criterion is inherently circular. We would naturally expect that passages which deal specifically with the sacrificial system, or laws of holiness, or genealogies, would be marked by a certain style and vocabulary. Variations in style, literary genre, or vocabulary do not automatically indicate disparate sources. They just as easily indicate different subject matter.

8. Critique of the Documentary Hypothesis

The following is a summary of Rooker's excellent critique of the Documentary Hypothesis (Rooker, 31-38):

- a) It is undergirded by evolutionary presuppositions
- (1) The philosophy of evolution is "the silent presupposition of the Documentary Hypothesis."
 - (2) Thus DH effectively eliminates the supernatural activities of God from the Bible in the same way its biological progenitor removed God from creation.
 - (3) Both accomplish this by ascribing naturalistic forces as the sole driver of change.
 - (4) Rooker identifies two key ways in which evolutionary principles "infected" the DH:
 - (a) Religion evolves from simple to complex
 - (i) DH assumes that the religious life of man began with primitive animism and progressed naturalistically to polydemonism, to polytheism, to monolatry, and finally to monotheism.
 - (ii) Yet this phenomenon has never been observed in history.
 - (iii) Indeed, the opposite seems to be the documented case: religion seems to move from complexity to simplicity in cultures
 - (iv) Any society that has adopted monotheism did so because it was introduced to them by another monotheistic culture.
 - (b) Judaism represents a late development of religion
 - (i) DH assumes that the complexity of Israel's religious institution must be the product of a long, evolutionary development.
 - (ii) In J and E, God was worshipped under the stars unencumbered by rituals, sacrifices, and priests.
 - (iii) As history progressed, it grew into the Israelite religion of P, with its intricate temple sacrificial system.
 - (iv) Yet archaeological evidence demonstrates that religious institutions just as intricate as Israel's existed as far back as the 3rd millennium B.C., over 1,000 years before Moses!

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- b) It assumes it can authoritatively reconstruct the history of the text
 - (1) DH proponents demonstrate a bold arrogance in their insistence that they can reconstruct an authoritative history of the biblical text without actually taking into consideration the history described in the text itself.
 - (2) Its evolutionary assumptions of Israel's religious history mixed with its naturalistic explanations for Scripture lead to false conclusions about what was really going on *behind* the text.
 - (3) Thus the tabernacle, for example, is viewed as a fictitious projection of the temple back in the wilderness.
 - (4) It's reliance—in fact, insistence—on the oral transmission of ancient stories before they were written down flies in the face of our knowledge of ANE writing systems.
 - (5) There is simply no reason to assume that long periods of time elapsed before major events were recorded in written form.
- c) It holds that the prophets were innovators of Israelite religion
 - (1) One of the fundamental tenets of DH is that it assumes that the prophets were the “primary innovators of Israelite religion and in some sense inspired the writing of biblical laws” and that the law and the cult were postexilic developments.
 - (2) But the field of biblical intertextuality has demonstrated that just the opposite is true—the prophets were proclaiming a well-established Israelite faith by quoting, alluding to, or expanding on the implications of previously written texts.
 - (3) Meanwhile, enhancements in diachronic Hebrew studies have shown that prophets such as Ezekiel—who were supposedly the inspiration for P—are actually written in a stratum of Hebrew much later than that of Leviticus.
- d) It effectively denies the authority of Scripture
 - (1) Walking in lock step with its biological counterpart, the evolutionary and anti-supernatural assumptions of DH effectively illegitimize the possibility of special revelation.
 - (2) It assumes and even demands that God is unable to communicate to mankind in any meaningful way or intervene in human history.
 - (3) “Historical-critical method is mainly a negative method. The critical method tries to discern historical truths about the time and the authorship of biblical texts, and in many cases the conclusions differ from what the texts themselves are saying either explicitly or implicitly.... The starting point is the suspicion that the text itself might have no integrity” (Rendtorff, “What We Miss By Taking the Bible Apart,” 42).

C. Evidence for Mosaic Authorship of Leviticus

1. Internal evidence

a) Chronology

- (1) The tabernacle was erected on the 1st day of the 1st month of the 2nd year after the exodus (Exod 40:1, 17; Num 1:1).
- (2) 50 days later, the Israelites departed from Sinai (Num 10:11).
- (3) Since God revealed the contents of Leviticus to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Lev 26:46; 27:34), and since the tabernacle was already erected in Leviticus (Lev 1:1), then God most likely revealed the contents of Leviticus during that 50-day period.

b) Direct Statements

- (1) There are roughly 50 statements indicating that Yahweh spoke directly to Moses, instructing him to speak to the people the contents of Leviticus (1:1; 4:1; 5:14; 6:1, 8, 19, 24; 7:22, 28, 38; 8:1; 11:1; 12:1; 13:1; 14:1, 33; 15:1; 16:1, 2; 17:1; 18:1; 19:1; 20:1; 21:1, 16; 22:1, 17, 26; 23:1, 9, 23, 26, 33; 24:1, 13, 23; 25:1; 26:46; 27:1, 34).
- (2) In this way, numerous authors have commented that no other book in Scripture affirms divine inspiration as frequently as Leviticus.

c) Setting

- (1) The language of Leviticus indicates a wilderness setting.
- (2) References to the tabernacle and the camp are commonplace.
- (3) The land of Canaan is mentioned as a future reality into which God is bringing them (14:34; 23:10).
- (4) The Israelites are assumed to be within easy access to the tabernacle (17:1-9).
- (5) The wilderness setting not only characterizes the narrative and introductory material, but are frequently alluded to in the laws themselves.

2. External evidence

- a) The contents of Leviticus fit very well within a mid-2nd millennium ANE context. The sacrificial rituals, the priesthood, legal context, etc., all find parallels in ANE cultures of the era.
- b) Frequent allusions or quotations of Leviticus are found in the Book of Ezekiel (Lev 10:10 in Ezek 22:26; Lev 18:5 in Ezek 20:11), indicating the book's antiquity. It does not necessarily prove *Mosaic* authorship, but it does support the notion that the book and its contents were well known by the time of Ezekiel.

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- c) The postexilic Jewish community assumed Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch (1 Chron 15:15; 22:13; 2 Chron 23:18; 24:6; 25:4; 30:16; 35:12; Ezra 3:2; 7:6; Neh 1:7; 8:1; 13:1; Mal 4:4).
- d) Jesus consistently affirmed Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch—including Leviticus—frequently referring to it with phrases like “Moses and the Prophets” (Luke 16:29, 31; 24:37) or “the law of Moses” (Luke 24:44; Acts 28:23).
- e) Later NT writers also affirm Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (Matt 8:4; Mark 12:26; Luke 16:31; 25:27, 44; John 1:17; Acts 3:22; Rom 10:5).

IV. Background

A. Covenant Context

1. Abrahamic Covenant

- a) The single overarching covenant of the OT is the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants.
- b) God promises to make Abraham a great nation, to bless him, and to give him a land (Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 18:17-19; 22:15-18; 26:2-5, 24; 28:13-15; 35:10-12; 46:2-4).
- c) In so doing, he purposes to bring ultimate blessing to all the nations of the earth.
- d) The Abrahamic Covenant, then, reveals God’s intention to reverse the curse of the fall brought on by the rebellion of man and the nations (Gen 1-11).

2. Mosaic Covenant

- a) The Mosaic Covenant is a subordinate covenant to the Abrahamic Covenant.
- b) While the Abrahamic Covenant revealed God’s intention to bless the nations, the Mosaic Covenant showed the means by which he intended to accomplish it.
- c) He took Abraham’s descendants, formed them into a nation, set them apart from other peoples, and charged them with representing him to the world.

3. Leviticus and the Covenants

- a) There is a close and interwoven relationship between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. The latter constitutes the outworking of the former’s goals.
- b) The key element to realizing the blessings promised in the Abrahamic Covenant is Israel’s obedience to the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant.
- c) This relationship is made especially clear in Leviticus 26.
 - (1) The promised blessings for covenant obedience are expressions of the blessings promised in the Abrahamic Covenant (Barrick, “Inter-covenantal Truth and Relevance,” 5):
 - (a) productivity (Lev 26:4-5; cf. Gen 24:35; 27:28; 30:43)

- (b) peace (Lev 26:6; cf. Gen 22:17)
 - (c) power (Lev 26:7-8; cf. Gen 22:17)
 - (d) population (Lev 26:9; cf. Gen 12:2; 17:6)
 - (e) provision (Lev 26:10; cf. Gen 24:35; 27:28; 30:43)
 - (f) presence (Lev 26:11-12; cf. Gen 17:7-8)
- (2) The key to Israel's enjoyment of these blessings is obedience to the Mosaic Covenant stipulations (Lev 26:3f).
 - (3) Conversely, disobedience would result in the reversal of blessing and the experience of cursing (Lev 26:14ff).
 - (4) Yet even if Israel experiences curses for disobedience, God's loyalty to the Abrahamic Covenant is the driving motivator for forgiveness and restoration (Lev 26:42-45).
- d) This close relationship between Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants finds its intersection in Leviticus.
 - e) The primary concern of Leviticus is Israel's role as a "holy nation" in God's program (Exod 19:6).
 - (1) If they are to be a kingdom of priests and thus act as a conduit of blessing to the nations, then they must be distinct from the world.
 - (2) Likewise, if Yahweh is to reside among them—a feature critical to the Mosaic Covenant—then they must be a holy nation.

B. Pentateuchal Context

1. The Pentateuch is a narrative explanation of the fulfillment of God's promise to make Abraham into a great nation.
2. Rooker explains that 3 elements are required for nationhood: people, land, and constitution. The Pentateuch chronicles the unfolding of each element:
 - a) People: God took Abraham, gave him offspring, brought them into Egypt as a small family, cultivated them there for 4 centuries, then brought them out as a numerous people (Gen 12-Exod 18).
 - b) Constitution: once out of Egypt, God gave them the laws that form the constitution of this newly formed nation (Exod 19-Num 10:10).
 - c) Land: after giving the law, the remainder of the material focuses on bringing Israel into the land in which they are to occupy as a nation (Num 10:11-Deut 34).
3. Leviticus rightly falls at the center of the Pentateuch. It expounds on the laws which govern Israel's relationship to Yahweh. It explains how they are to live so that God can reside in their midst, and how they must approach him in order to maintain harmony with him.

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C. ANE Context

1. Leviticus does not introduce a novel religious structure. Its used concepts that were very familiar to the people.
2. The laws and regulations of Leviticus reveal a religious context which finds numerous parallels to other ANE cultures.
3. Concepts like sacred space, temples, priests, sacrifices, etc., were not inventions of Israelite religion. They were well-established expressions of religious life and expression not only in ancient Canaan but also in Egypt and Mesopotamia.
4. The Israelites would have been well familiar with these structures.
5. Nevertheless, there are real differences between ANE religious practices and the system presented in Leviticus.
6. “The essential difference between religious institutions in existence and the covenant made at Sinai was the content. Israel may have had similar institutions and structures, but their focus was on the one true and living God. In a sense, God was putting new wine into old wineskins” (Ross, 21).

V. Major Themes

A. Holiness

1. Holiness is the central theme of the book of Leviticus.
2. The root word **קדש**, “to be holy” and its various derivatives occur 152x in the book—more than any other book in the OT.
3. Key verses
 - a) Leviticus 10:10: “[You are to] make distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean.”
 - b) Leviticus 11:44-45: “For I am Yahweh your God. Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.... For I am Yahweh, who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God, so you are to be holy, for I am holy.”
 - c) Leviticus 19:2: “Speak to all the congregation of the Israelites and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy.’”
 - d) Leviticus 20:7: “You shall consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am Yahweh your God.”
 - e) Leviticus 20:26: “Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I, Yahweh, am holy, and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine.”
4. These words reflect the covenant intentions expressed in Exodus 19:6 that Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Thus, Leviticus represents a manual for how Israel may fulfill its covenant responsibility.

5. Chapters 1-16 clarify how Israel is to be holy before Yahweh. The sacrificial system (chs. 1-7), the priesthood (chs. 8-10), the purity laws (chs. 11-15), and the Day of Atonement (ch. 16) all explain how Israel is to maintain its holiness before Yahweh, thus ensuring his continual presence among them.
6. Chapters 17-27 contains the holiness code and promised blessings and curses which explain, among other things, how Israel is to demonstrate its holiness among the nations.
7. “All priests must be holy in order to serve the holy God. This was first of all a description of their character before God: they were set apart to His service and were to be separated from anything that would defile them and hinder their divinely appointed service” (Barrick, “The Mosaic Covenant,” 225).

B. Presence

1. Yahweh’s presence among his people is a central aspect of his covenant with them and was critical to their ability to carry out their covenant mandate.
2. His presence is presupposed throughout the book. For instance, the book repeatedly emphasizes that the sacrifices are to be offered “before Yahweh,” or “in the presence of Yahweh.”
3. The book distinguishes between different aspects of God’s presence.
 - a) God is permanently present among his people, yet his visible presence (glory) appears only on certain significant occasions.
 - b) God is present in a general way in the camp of Israel, yet his presence is also said to be localized specifically above the ark of the covenant.
4. This multifaceted presentation of Yahweh’s presence underscores the significance of this theme in the book.
5. Israel cannot be a kingdom of priests without God’s enduring presence among them, and the book offers them a clear understanding of how his presence may be maintained.

C. Sacrifice

1. Meaning of “atonement”
 - a) Introductory Matters
 - (1) The English term “atonement” can be traced back to its Middle English origins, where it once stood as two words—“at one(ment)”—emphasizing the need for reconciliation between two parties.
 - (2) The term was first employed in William Tyndale’s 1526 translation of *katallagē* in 2 Cor 5:18, which speaks of the reconciliation between God and man achieved through Christ.

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- (3) At some point it became the principle English word to translate the Hebrew term כִּפָּר (kāphar) This has presented difficulties, since the etymology of the term is less than clear.
- (4) The verb כִּפָּר alone occurs 102x in the OT, and over half of them are in Leviticus. This “indicates not only that Leviticus says more about atonement than any other book but that it also is one of the key terms that needs clarification to understand the book’s contents” (Rooker, 52).

b) Proposed Meanings

- (1) “to cover/wipe on”
 - (a) Based on an Arabic cognate and assumed to derive from a noun meaning “pitch, tar.”
 - (b) Theological emphasis: the sacrifice “covered over” the sin until the final sacrifice came.
 - (c) Ex. Genesis 6:14 (cover w/ pitch)
 - (d) Poor methodology and the inability to demonstrate its meaning in Hebrew have led most scholars to abandon this position.
- (2) “to wipe clean/purge”
 - (a) Based on an Akkadian cognate
 - (b) Theological emphasis: the sacrifice “wiped away” or “purged” sin or impurity, resulting in forgiveness and reconciliation.
 - (c) Ex.: Jer 18:23 (wipe away/blot out)
- (3) “to ransom”
 - (a) Based on the assumption that it derives from a noun meaning, “ransom/bribe.”
 - (b) Theological emphasis: the sacrifice “ransomed” the sinner by standing in the place of the sinner.
 - (c) Ex.: Lev 17:11 (blood makes ransom for the soul)

c) Best Solution

- (1) Several scholars have suggested a hybrid solution to the problem based on the particular object of the verb (Wenhan, Rooker).
- (2) When an inanimate object is the object of the verb’s action, the idea of “wiping away” or “purging” fits the context best.
- (3) But when a person receives the action of the verb, the idea of “ransom” seems to fit better.

- (4) On the one hand, sacrifices meant to atone for the tabernacle could be said to “wipe clean” the tabernacle and the altar and “purge” it from the impurities brought on by the sins of the people.
- (5) On the other hand, sacrifices meant to atone for people could be said to stand as a “ransom” for the individual. The blood of the sacrifice paid the necessary ransom price to free the sinner.

2. ANE Context

The sacrificial system presented in the book of Leviticus is both a point of commonality and distinction with the pagan religions of the ANE.

a) Commonality

- (1) The surrounding nations all practiced sacrificial rituals
- (2) “God did not reveal himself nor relate to the Israelites from a historical vacuum. He related to the nation in a manner in which they were accustomed and thus could understand” (Rooker, 48).

b) Distinction

- (1) In pagan religion, sacrifices were a means of manipulating the gods to achieve selfish ends. It was something the gods needed and that humans could utilize to gain their favor.
- (2) In the Israelite system, sacrifices were the means of atoning for sin and thus maintaining a right relationship to Yahweh. It was something the people needed.
- (3) “The integration and cohesiveness of the entire sacrificial construct is one major way the religion of Israel was distinguished from all other sacrificial systems in the ancient world” (Rooker, 48).

VI. Preliminary Outline

There are two main sections (chs. 1-16, 17-27) to the Book of Leviticus. The laws concerning the Day of Atonement (ch. 16) falls in the center of the book between these sections and function as an important transitional chapter.

- A. Laws Concerning the Sacrifices (chs. 1-7)
- B. Institution of the Priesthood (chs. 8-10)
- C. Laws of Purity (chs. 11-15)
- D. Day of Atonement (ch. 16)
- E. Laws of Holiness (chs. 17-24)
- F. Year of Jubilee (ch. 25)
- G. Covenant Blessings and Curses (ch. 26)

Introduction to Leviticus

H. Vows and Promises (ch. 27)

VII. The Purpose of the Book of Leviticus

Yahweh gave instructions that enabled Him to live among His chosen people and enabled His people to have fellowship with Him.

VIII. Resources

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