

Introduction to Leviticus

Where is it in the Bible?

Leviticus is the third book in the Old Testament and, therefore, the third book in the Bible. It is also center of the Pentateuch or Torah, since it is the third of five books.

Who wrote it?

Like the other books in the Pentateuch, Moses is traditionally identified as its author. However, it is the product of a long period of development with two primary sources. The Priestly source (P) was responsible for chapters 1-16, while the Holiness source (H) provided the remainder of the book.

When was it written?

Evidence indicates that the events which are described in Exodus took place around 1250 B.C. However, like Genesis, this book was most likely written and revised over a period of hundreds of years. Most scholars feel it was completed during or shortly after the Babylonian exile (587-538 B.C.); however, recently some have suggested that it might be earlier than that.

What is it about?

The name of the book comes from its title in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which means “relating to the Levites”. It is concerned with the duties of the Levites at worship, ceremonial cleanness and holy days, as well as some moral laws to guide life in the community.

With all of the detailed instructions that seem to have no relevance for today, Leviticus can be a real challenge. For its original writers and audience, the book provided guidance (*torah*) for how sinful humans could maintain a relationship with God who is holy. Although we as Christians no longer follow the sacrificial system described in Leviticus, we are still called to lives that honor God and many of the instructions in the book apply to us.

How is it structured?

- I. Sacrifices (1:1-7:38)
 - a. Whole burnt offering (1:1-17)
 - b. Cereal offering (2:1-16)
 - c. Peace offering (3:1-17)
 - d. Sin offering (4:1-5:13)
 - e. Guilt offering (5:14-6:7)
 - f. Priests' sacrificial dues (6:8-7:38)
- II. Consecration of Aaron and His Sons (8:1-10:20)
- III. Laws Regarding Ritual Purity (11:1-16:34)
 - a. Clean and unclean animals (11:1-47)
 - b. Childbirth (12:1-8)
 - c. Skin diseases (13:1-14:57)
 - d. Genital discharges (15:1-33)
 - e. Day of atonement (16:1-34)

- IV. The Holiness Code (17:1-26:46)
 - a. Teaching on blood (17:1-16)
 - b. Sexual relations (18:1-30)
 - c. Miscellaneous holiness laws (19:1-22:33)
 - d. Festivals (23:1-44)
 - e. Ritual objects and blasphemy (24:1-23)
 - f. Sabbath and jubilee years (25:1-55)
 - g. Blessings and curses (26:1-46)
- V. Appendix on Offerings and Gifts (27:1-34)

What are some of its themes?

- **Atonement:** Atonement is the way in which the broken relationship between God and humanity can be restored. There were daily atonement rituals, but the Day of Atonement provided an annual opportunity to cleanse the people and the sanctuary of any sin that might have been “missed”. This would ensure God’s continued presence in the community.
- **Holiness:** The key word in Leviticus is “holy”. It is used 76 times in the NRSV translation in reference to God, the priests, the sacrifices, and the people. The words “You shall be holy, for I am holy” are repeated several times. This holiness refers to the way the people are to live, as well as ritual purity.
- **Sabbath:** The writers of the book emphasize times of rest for creation. This is most obvious in the instructions for a weekly day of worship (23:3-8). However, the book also talks about a Sabbath year (25:1-7) and the Year of Jubilee (25:8-55) to provide freedom and rest for the land as well as the people.
- **Worship:** Most of Leviticus is devoted to discussions related to worship. Worship was central to the life of the community and was an important way to maintain holiness.