

## Leviticus Bible Study #1

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

### Leviticus 1:1-2

1 The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, 2 “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.

### **Introduction**

The Pentateuch is the collection of the five books penned by Moses. It begins with Genesis, which details the creation of the world by God and the origin of the Israelite peoples from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as well as how their descendants found a temporary home in Egypt. Exodus comes after, which describes the end of Israelite slavery in Egypt as God delivers judgment against the Egyptians and takes His chosen people to Sinai to receive the Law. After Leviticus, there is Numbers which teaches us about the census of the Israelites and their wilderness sojourn. Deuteronomy comes last in the five as a renewal of the Old Covenant and a commentary on the Ten Commandments.

Leviticus has a tendency to feel “out of place” among the other books of the Pentateuch to modern readers. The name is Latin, and refers to the full phrase *Liber Leviticus*, or “The Levite Book.” This is to say, it indicates that the entirety of the text is concerned with the tribe of Levi in its priestly operations for the Israelites. With very little historical narrative, most of the book is concerned with regulations and commands about sacrifices, cleanliness standards, holiness standards, festival gatherings and a “proto-Covenant” which is more fully stated in the later chapters of Deuteronomy.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Leviticus is a *religious* handbook for the children of Israel, and more specifically the children of Levi, as they begin to live as a coherent nation.

It is understandable if one raises his eyebrow at Leviticus seeming to be an interjection between the more narrative focused books. But it ought not surprise us that such a book had to be written. The Lord show His Providence in that He does not permit His people to live in an anarchic state of being, whether civically or religiously. With Leviticus, God provides a structure of living, believing and preserving the history of His relationship with them.

### *Who Wrote Leviticus?*

From the very first verse, Leviticus proclaims that Moses is the chief author of the book, as it is a written record of things God commanded him to say for the sake of instituting the Law. This places the authorship around 1445 B.C., before the beginning of Israel's 40 year wilderness sojourn. In the Gospels, our Lord Jesus confirms Mosaic authorship for the entire Pentateuch,<sup>2</sup> and of course Christ being Divine means we have assurance of the truth of the matter. This does not mean that Moses *alone* wrote every syllable, as there is some evidence that Moses had a secretary (or *amanuensis*) writing at times for him. After all, the final chapter of Deuteronomy includes the details concerning Moses's death,<sup>3</sup> and the period of mourning after he shed his mortal coil; to say the least, it is unlikely that the Lawgiver wrote posthumously. In addition to this, since Moses was brought up in the royal court of

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1 Deuteronomy 28

2 Matthew 8:1-4, cf. Leviticus 14

3 Deuteronomy 34

Egypt, he clearly relies on the oral and written tradition sources regarding matters of history previous to his own birth; someone had to *tell* Moses that the tribe of Asher was named according to Leah's happiness at Zilpah giving birth.<sup>4</sup>

While there is clear evidence that Moses utilized tradition sources which were previously divinely inspired, and he employed an amanuensis, he is still named as the principle author of the Pentateuch by Scripture wherever the topic is brought up. Accordingly, believers are called to reject the “documentary hypothesis” which claims that anonymous writers, each having exclusive motivations, wrote different books that were eventually redacted into the Pentateuch we have today. The claim is made by modernistic theologians like Julius Wellhausen that various names being used for God, like Elohim and the Tetragrammaton, are evidence of different authors, and the different contents of the five books are proof that different authors must have been used. Without taking too much time, suffice it to say that the theory lacks any credibility. Scholars do not question the use of different epithets for deities in pagan religions, and nor do they say that different authors penned works which utilize varied titles. Moses had the acumen necessary to utilize different names for God. Further, the different *purpose* of the different *books* in the Pentateuch is best understood as Moses writing for different *reasons*. A man writing a technical manual for a car does not have to write in the same technical style when penning a love letter to his wife; so too is Moses going to write historical narratives like Genesis differently than he writes a regulatory text like Leviticus.

### *Historical Context*

An entire book is written for a single tribe of Israel, who alone is tasked with running religious matters for the country. Why is this the case? The reason for it courses throughout the Pentateuch from the very beginning. Levi as a tribe was denied a land inheritance because their patriarch, Levi, was involved with killing Hamor and all the men of his city after the rape of Levi's sister Dinah; thus Jacob pronounced a prophetic utterance that he and his brother Simeon were to be scattered through the Promised Land.<sup>5</sup> In Numbers, the tribe of Levi was only granted a number of cities spread out, as Jacob predicted, through the land.<sup>6</sup> Being a “floating” tribe, God decided to take them unto Himself as a tribe of servants.

The appropriation of Levi as a priestly tribe is also presented as a means of redemption. After the Exodus, God consecrated all the firstborn of the tribes of Israel, as a remembrance for the Passover. The firstborn of any animal was to be sacrificed, while the firstborn of men was to be redeemed with an animal sacrifice; even with the offering being made, the firstborn still belonged to God.<sup>7</sup> Yet our Lord had no intention of breaking families apart; instead, the tribe of Levi was chosen to *represent* all those firstborn.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the tribe not only represented the people before our Lord in terms of sacerdotal efficacy, but also they prefigure the high priestly ministry of Christ.

### *Geographic and Historical Context*

While there is little historical narrative in Leviticus, the events described occur shortly after the renewal of the Covenant.<sup>9</sup> The children of Israel had failed to remain faithful during Moses's first forty day sojourn up the mountain, leading to the golden calf incident. The people were slated for destruction, when Moses intervened on their behalf. Exodus ends with the people beginning to depart the foot of Mount Sinai, having become the beneficiaries of the renewal God offered.<sup>10</sup> Leviticus is

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4 Genesis 30:9-13

5 Genesis 34, 49:5-7

6 Numbers 35:1-8

7 Exodus 13:1-16

8 Numbers 3:11-13

9 Exodus 34:10-28

10 Exodus 40:34-38

written as these travels continue, and they expand on the intercessory role of the priesthood in obtaining redemption for sinful people. Moses' intercession for the people after the golden calf incident forms the pattern and basis for Levitical ministry from that point on.<sup>11</sup> By their efforts, the priests and Levites were to serve as intermediaries between God and the children of Israel so as to ensure mercy and atonement could be made.

### **The Place of Leviticus in the Christian's Life**

There is no neutral reading of Leviticus. Scripture attests that all of its contents are, at least in the ultimate sense, about Jesus.<sup>12</sup> This is *doubly* so for Leviticus, as the entirety of the Levitical system, down to even the implements used by the priests, are intended for foreshadow Christ's redemptive work for all humanity.<sup>13</sup> The entirety of Leviticus is intended to preserve the Old Covenant believers under a system which points to Jesus constantly. With this aspect, Leviticus grants Christians a deeper appreciation for their freedom under the New Covenant, and a greater understanding of the way of life that Old Covenant saints experienced.

Leviticus is also crucial for hermeneutics across the Scriptures. The interpreter simply must understand the festivals in order to understand the times and seasons of events in the histories and the Gospels. The specific cleanliness standards assist in explaining various discussions and parables – for instance, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and Levite not touching the victimized man left for dead would not have shocked nor angered Christ's audience, and nor would it paint the two as having moral failings. Such details are found throughout the histories, the prophets, the Gospels, the Psalms, and more. In other words, the book provides a key to understanding the rest of the Bible, and as such cannot be ignored.

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11 Exodus 32:7-14

12 Revelation 19:9-10

13 Hebrews 8:1-6, 10:1-4