

Leviticus Bible Study #2

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

Leviticus 1:1-17

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.

3 “If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD. **4** He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. **5** Then he shall kill the bull before the LORD, and Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. **6** Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, **7** and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. **8** And Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; **9** but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

10 “If his gift for a burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or goats, he shall bring a male without blemish, **11** and he shall kill it on the north side of the altar before the LORD, and Aaron's sons the priests shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar. **12** And he shall cut it into pieces, with its head and its fat, and the priest shall arrange them on the wood that is on the fire on the altar, **13** but the entrails and the legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall offer all of it and burn it on the altar; it is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

14 “If his offering to the LORD is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering of turtledoves or pigeons. **15** And the priest shall bring it to the altar and wring off its head and burn it on the altar. Its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. **16** He shall remove its crop with its contents and cast it beside the altar on the east side, in the place for ashes. **17** He shall tear it open by its wings, but shall not sever it completely. And the priest shall burn it on the altar, on the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

Introduction

Before diving into the text we must ask why this system of sacrifice is introduced in the first place, with men being required to bring their offerings to the priests at the Tabernacle. The ancient expression of the true religion underwent a subtle yet powerful change between the books of Exodus and Leviticus. While the first animal sacrifice portrayed in Scripture is that of Abel's in Genesis,¹ nothing is revealed to us about how he and his brother Cain were instructed to make offerings. The next time we see an offering, it is when Noah builds an altar and makes a burnt offering after the subsiding of the waters of the Flood.² Hereafter there is the Binding of Isaac, in which Abraham builds an altar at Moria – and after he passes the test he sacrifices a ram there.³ After meeting God in Bethel, Jacob makes a pillar and pours out a drink offering.⁴ Once more, in all of these there is no clear instruction given, no established priesthood, and no delineation of which parts of which animal are to be sacrificed.

1 Genesis 4:3-5

2 Genesis 8:20-22

3 Genesis 22:9-14

4 Genesis 35:13-15

While there is mention of a Melchizedek being “priest of God Most High,”⁵ it is generally assumed that whoever was a believer in the true God had the right and responsibility of offerings; this was almost certainly the exclusive domain of males, on account of Adam's rulership over Eve. Nonetheless, in the nomadic and semi-nomadic context of the Near East, the assumption is that, at most, the office of mediation through sacrifice was conducted by individuals, or the head of a family on behalf of that family.

Over time there was a development of sacerdotal offices by which a specific class of persons was responsible for conducting sacrifices and making requests of divinities. Yet this is first seen in *pagan* cultures, not among those who worship the true God. As Joseph the son of Jacob begins to run Egypt on behalf of Pharaoh, he buys up land from the native Egyptians in exchange for grain, but the lands stewarded by the priests are exempt.⁶ As a class, they were an aristocratic caste which was able to offer up a daughter for Joseph to marry.⁷ But by the time of the Exodus, it remained the case for people who worshiped the *true* God that sacrifices were typically performed by tribal chieftains or heads of families: we see this both with Job (Abraham's contemporary)⁸ and Jethro (Moses' father-in-law).⁹ Though Jethro is first referred to as the “priest of Midian,”¹⁰ this is an honorary title, as he is shown to be first and foremost a shepherd.

This appears to have been the intent for the children of Israel upon their release from Egyptian bondage. Early on at Sinai, the ones conducting sacrifices were simple designated priests without reference to their lineage.¹¹ A few chapters later, they are found to be young men working with Moses for the confirmation of the Covenant.¹² The intent was for a nation of priests who operated alongside Aaron and his lineage (who would be the first among equals).^{13,14} It is only after the golden calf incident, in which the sons of Levi appear to have been the only ones who abstained from Israel's apostatic revelry, in which the nature of Israel's relationship to the priesthood began to change.¹⁵ No longer was Israel slated to be a “nation of priests,” but a nation which possessed a *tribe* of priests.

This helps us to understand Biblical history. As an example, when Jeroboam I took ten tribes of Israel in secession from Judah, his “reforms” included permitting people of non-Levitical descent to become priests and building golden calves in a sort of misguided “traditionalist” movement;¹⁶ the message he sent was effectively to tell the Israelites “we are going back to the way things were, restoring the original priesthood.” But such so-called “reforms” were never going to last, for it was not until after Pentecost that God permitted a restoration of the universal priesthood; it was explicitly reserved for the restoration brought about by Christ.¹⁷ Until then, the Old Covenant saints were strictly forbidden to live under any other system than the granular regulations and rules presented by that of the Aaronic priesthood and their patrilineal line, and the tribe of Levi being their assistants. Thus St. Paul speaks of the Law being added on account of transgressions.¹⁸ Suffice it to say, Leviticus would not have been necessary if it were not for the golden calf incident.

5 Genesis 14:18

6 Genesis 47:20-22

7 Genesis 41:50

8 Job 1:1-5

9 Exodus 18:10-12, called Reuel in Exodus 2

10 Exodus 2:16-22

11 Exodus 19:21-25

12 Exodus 24:3-8

13 Exodus 19:6

14 Instructions for the consecration of the Aaronic line are found in Exodus 29, but this does not happen until Leviticus 8

15 Exodus 32:25-29

16 1 Kings 12:25-31

17 1 Peter 2:9-10, notably predicted as an aside in Isaiah 61:6

18 Galatians 3:19

Vs.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.

Before there is any command in Leviticus, there is the assumption that people will be making offerings. This is on account of previous commands (e.g., that of the Passover Lamb), but there is also *precedent* guiding the Israelites. Offerings had been made for over two thousand years at this point, beginning with Abel's sacrifices. So Moses receives a message, not about *if* the people will make offerings for the priests to sacrifice, but *when* and by *whom*. No longer could an Israelite make an offering by himself as previous generations had; now it must be done with the assistance and guidance of a priest.

The purposes for a sacrifice were varied, from atonement to thanksgiving, but the thing that all animal sacrifices shared was their expensive quality. “From the herd or from the flock” means that an offering of a sheep, goat or bull was expected. In the modern era, a sheep is expensive;¹⁹ a cow is much more expensive.²⁰ The average man was supposed to understand that, though the priest did the burning, *he* was making a real sacrifice, demonstrated by his own responsibility to slit the animal's throat. It is, after all, a life that he is giving. The livestock were dying on behalf of and instead of the ones making the sacrifices.

Vs.3

3 “If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD.

The demand for unblemished sacrifices is for two reasons. First, as our Lord explains in Malachi, our God is a great King and as such deserves only the best.²¹ The initial plan for Israel's governance was not to have an earthly king, but for God to be their King. A human king, who would impose his own taxes in the form of grain and wine and livestock, was understood to be an eventuality, but not the ideal as set out in the Law.²² Thus, while the sacrifices endured after the establishment of the monarchy, they nonetheless served as regular confessions by the people that their *true* King was our Heavenly Father, and that they served under *His* laws.

The second (and more important) purpose for unblemished sacrifices is that every single sacrifice was intended to preach the Gospel. St. Peter teaches that the blood of Christ is comparable to the blood of an unblemished lamb, in that He is sinless and perfect.²³ The author of Hebrews says that *every* sacrifice is connected in its own way to Jesus, even their being taken outside the camp after the sacrifices are performed.²⁴ While there is mystery to its exact mechanics, each time an animal was offered it was a kind of pantomime of the Atonement won on the Cross. The first chapter of Leviticus provides a template for further sacrifices that were performed for different purposes – each of which emphasizes a different aspect of the Gospel.

Vs.4-13

4 He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. 5 Then he shall kill the bull before the LORD, and Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw

19 From *Raising Sheep*: <https://www.raisingssheep.net/how-much-do-sheep-cost>

20 <https://circlejmeat.com/blog/how-much-does-a-whole-cow-cost-in-2026>

21 Malachi 1:14

22 Deuteronomy 17:14-20

23 1 Peter 1:17-19

24 Hebrews 13:10-13

the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. **6** Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, **7** and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. **8** And Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; **9** but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

10 “If his gift for a burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or goats, he shall bring a male without blemish, **11** and he shall kill it on the north side of the altar before the LORD, and Aaron's sons the priests shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar. **12** And he shall cut it into pieces, with its head and its fat, and the priest shall arrange them on the wood that is on the fire on the altar, **13** but the entrails and the legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall offer all of it and burn it on the altar; it is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

The one making the offering slaughters the animal after placing his hand on its head. This is a representation of the atonement, or *כָּפַר* which quite literally means “to cover.”^{25,26} This is to say, the sacrifice starts with a covering for the animal who in turn covers the man with its life. This *covering* of the man by the animal's life is then shown quite literally, because the Scripture attests that blood has life in it and this life is thrown all about the altar.²⁷ Since the altar represents the man, with the sacrifice upon it, the blood shed on it represents the human being being covered in its blood. This foreshadows the way in which believers are washed of their sins by the shed blood of Christ – the spotless Lamb of God.

The slaughter is performed on the north face of the altar, because the entrance to the tent of meeting was always oriented with the priests facing toward the east, in the direction of the rising of the sun; the priests were expected to be facing *east* as they presented and burned the sacrifice.²⁸ This is for two reasons. The later Aaronic Benediction includes the words “May He make His Face to shine upon you,”²⁹ so when a sacrifice was made the sun itself would shine on the man making the sacrifice as a representation of God's blessing on the offering. The second reason is on account of Eden, the place where man first belonged, being planted in the east.³⁰ In effect, the statement being made by this representation is that the man, who is not in his original home and thus destined to die, looks forward *to* that blessed space as he gives the life of his animal in exchange for his own. In addition, Golgotha, where our Lord was Crucified was directly west of the Temple Mount; those who observed His crucifixion looked eastward at Him.

The head is placed on the altar first, then the fat on top of it, before the rest of the animal is washed and burned. This is under the assumption that the food offering is just that – a meal. The animals' body is cooked in its own fat as the flames ignite the meat, causing the sweet aroma of fat to fill the air and move heavenward. This is shown to please our Lord, who bestows His favor on those who are willing to give up the meat, labor and money that the animal offered could have given.

Vs.14-17

14 “If his offering to the LORD is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering of turtledoves or pigeons. **15** And the priest shall bring it to the altar and wring off its head and burn it on the altar. Its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. **16** He shall remove its crop with its contents and cast it beside the altar on the east side, in the place for ashes. **17** He shall tear it open by its wings, but shall not sever it completely. And the priest shall burn it on the altar, on the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

25 Transliterated “Kaphar,” Strong's #3722

26 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3722.htm>

27 Leviticus 17:11, Genesis 9:4

28 Exodus 27:13

29 Numbers 6:23-27

30 Genesis 2:8

Sacrifices were to be expensive, but not universal in cost. What is expensive to a wealthy Israelite rancher is unimaginable to a slave or farmhand. So, for those who cannot afford a lamb, goat or bull, the concession is made that they may offer up pigeons or turtledoves. While pigeon costs run the gamut in the modern era,³¹ they were among the cheapest animals a poor family could afford – but still left an impact on their bottom line. Since it is a smaller vessel, the operations are simpler but have the same impact. God is still pleased by the food offering and aroma, for He loves the poor just as much as the rich. To put it more poetically, the aroma which pleases God is not the scent of burning meat and fat, but the devout believer's trust and prayers rising up to Him in the act of sacrifice and obedience to the Levitical system. The Israelite making the best offering he could was a demonstration of absolute faith and trust, to the point of humbly submitting to the authority of the priesthood.

On the topic of how Leviticus helps us understand the rest of the Scripture, this chapter enlightens us concerning certain soteriological statements. It especially helps us also to understand why the disciples of Christ were so shocked when they heard Him say that it is “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”³² On account of the financial difficulties and burdens of bringing in offerings, it was easier (relatively speaking) for a rich man to do godly things in accordance with the Levitical system. It would have been common sense that the man who could make greater and more frequent offerings to our Lord would have an easier time getting into Heaven. Christ says that such a notion is exactly backwards, for that rich man need not make a true and impacting *sacrifice* which is *difficult* enough to garner trusting, salvific faith in our Lord. And that faith, both between the Gospels and the text of Leviticus, was the thing God is seeking from men.

31 <https://birdsandtrees.net/pigeons-cost-pets-price-guide/>

32 Matthew 19:23-26