

Leviticus

[Discussion Date: April 24, the week after Baptism/Communion]

Introduction

Leviticus records what transpired on Mount Sinai for roughly one year (Lev. 27:34; Num. 10:11-13).

The Greek derived name is appropriate. Leviticus means "pertaining to the Levites." The Levites were the clan designated to assist Aaron and his sons who served as priests (Num. 3:5). Levi was Jacob's son by Leah; Aaron is a Levite so the Levites are servants of the tabernacle in general and within Levite ancestry emerged the Aaronic priests (later if there is a shortage of Levites for their work members from other tribes may be summoned to fill the gap).

Among other things, it gives priestly guidelines to govern the relationship between Israel and God. The priest is a mediator between God and man. The theme is slightly broader than the priesthood: *the ceremonial law is given by God to guide Israelite worship at the Tabernacle and in daily life.*

The Tabernacle was the place of meeting with God through sacrifice offered by duly consecrated priests. The tabernacle was built according to God's design (cf. Ex. 25:8, "have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them). Again note the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham: "I will be their God" (Gen. 17:8).

1A. The entailment of covenant restoration

Covenant fulfillment entails restoration from the fall (Gen. 3:15) that will come through the seed of Abraham. Restoration is needed because man is sinful. A stairway between earth and heaven is needed (Gen. 28, Jacob's ladder). Therefore, meeting with God and being the people of God necessitates a priestly mediation.

Thus the worship theme of the third section of Exodus is expanded in the book of Leviticus. How can a sinful people worship a holy God? They must be a holy people, so he must be cleansed due to their sinfulness. For this there must be sacrifice mediated by a priesthood and there must be love as a way of life.

Discussion: Why all the killing of animals? Read Lev. 1:1-9; 4:20,26; 5:5-10 and note the emphasis on guilt and forgiveness in Israel's relationship with God.

2A. The shape of the book

The first section of the book (1-16) describes the principle of sacrifice mediated by specially qualified priests. It ends with the day of atonement (16). This special yearly presentation of sacrifice shows the foundation for the life of holiness described in the second section of the book (17-27). Thus we have:

The basis of fellowship with God (1-16, instruction in priestly sacrifice)

The life of fellowship with God (17-27, instruction in holiness)

Let's highlight each section briefly.

1B. The day of atonement in section one

The Hebrew means "to cover over" and the English suggests "at one" (atone), or at-one-ment, and thus reconciliation.

God dwelled in the most holy place of the tabernacle. A special offering was made once a year (16:2; 34) centering on two goats. The high priest must make sacrifice for himself (16:11). Then he slaughters one of two goats for the whole community (16:15-17). Finally, he lays his hands on the head of the live goat that is to be released into the desert (16:21-22). Sin is covered and carried away! By this Israel is a forgiven people with access to a holy God.

2B. The day of Jubilee in the second section

Among the guidelines of the second section is the instruction on Jubilee (25), a cumulative Sabbath. Each week has a Sabbath rest for fellowship with God; this is every seventh day. In their calendar there was also a Sabbath year for the land (25:1-7) preceded by working the land for six years.

After seven Sabbath years have been observed (or forty-nine years), there is to be a special Sabbath year, the fiftieth, the year of Jubilee (25:8-10). In this jubilee there is a special emphasis on freedom from slavery. It was a form of gospel promising rest from the bitterness of slavery in sin and giving access and fellowship with God to underserving sinners (to rest, recall, is to rest with God in His rest).

3B. Love

Holiness that arises from fellowship with God can be summarized in

the principle of loving God in the neighbor: (Lev 19:2,18; cf. Mat 22:36-40).

4B. Sacred times and festivals

Note the lessons that can be learned from the institution of sacred times and festivals, sacred space of the tabernacle, and sacred objects of altar and ark, sacred personnel, and sacred acts of sacrifice (all under divine regulation). Thus there is no sacred-secular in which a divine-human relation is isolated from a human-human relation.

Time is God's; there is no sacred realm versus a secular realm of existence. All the times and seasons meshed with daily life, work, and harvesting: "The effect was to encompass religious worship within the basic routines of societal life and not to allow any separation between the concrete realities of life - day and night, summer and winter, sowing and reaping - and religious faith" (Childs, p. 162). To this can be added the details on sexual uprightness and cleansings, sabbaths for the land, treatment of those with disease, procedures regarding those who die including the special regulations for priests.

Specially sacred space was allocated to the tabernacle but not to instill a sacred/secular dualism. It: 1) set God apart in his unique holiness and 2) demanded preparation on man's part to come into his presence because of his sin: "no one is to approach God unprepared." Otherwise, the rest of the book accents the imperative that every day life involves serving God.

3A. Message

1) The coming one

The seed of Eve and Abraham (Genesis) that must suffer for his friends (Job) as Passover lamb (Exodus) is a sacrifice for sins that bridges earth and heaven (Jacob, Gen. 28) and mediates forgiveness and reconciliation for fellowship with God and holy living by that sacrifice (Leviticus).

2) Good news

Jesus Christ is "final priest and sufficient sacrifice" (IOT 82). The book of Leviticus is gospel good news concerning our great high priest.

3) Love

So, we who have tasted of his grace are to love him by loving our neighbor through holy conduct (Lk. 10) in every area of life (with no sacred/secular realms or compartments).

Also, note that we are priests (1 Pet. 2:9) and doing good is our sacrificing (Heb. 13:16; cf. Col. 3, do all in His name giving thanks to God, which is priestly work). So, where is your tabernacle, your place of priestly work?: It is your place of work, everywhere. You have a calling to administer; the doors to your office building open to your sacred tabernacle and holy place for service to God and to others! (cf. the Macgrath, *Spirituality and the Reformers* on how this concept was applied in the Reformation).

In broad overview, what is the relation between the 10 words and the ritual laws? The ritual laws give the way of mediation for a broken law and protection from the wrath of God which brings death. A broken law becomes a burden, is a threat, and issues in death. By sacrifice there is peace and fellowship. Clinging to sacrifice (in the OT), and clinging to Christ as our sacrifice (in the NT) are thus included in the commitment to obedience in daily living (cf. Childs, OTCC, p. 57; ritual is a check on the power of sin, p. 87; now all of these things are rolled into the Christian Passover).

Leviticus study questions

1. What does the book of Leviticus teach us regarding the entailment of covenant restoration (in one sentence)?
2. How does the Jubilee reveal the gospel?
3. How is a sacred/secular compartmentalization countered in the book of Leviticus? Why doesn't a sacred/secular dualism stem from the sacred space allotted to the Tabernacle?
4. In Leviticus, how is the gospel revealed in the day of atonement (cf. the two animals)?
5. What is the message of Leviticus concerning Christ in context with Eve, Abraham, Jacob's ladder and Job?
6. How does Leviticus put the duty of love into perspective?