

Book Introduction & Outline

A suggestion. 2021. PS.

Introduction

The book Exodus ends with the erection of the Tent of Meeting (Exod. 40:34). In the book Leviticus, now the LORD speaks to Moses in that Tent (1:1), and he explains how the (worship) service at this Tent is to be carried out.

The LORD gave these instructions while the people camped near Mount Sinai (27:34). Leviticus consists almost entirely of these instructions. The only story-like/narrative section is the ordination of the priests and their first offerings in chapters 8–10 [and the incident in 24:10ff.]. These events took place in the beginning of the 2. year, shortly before the people left Sinai.

The service at the Tent was assigned to the tribe Levi. This is why the book is called Leviticus. But in fact, many tasks could only be carried out by the priests. The priests belonged to one clan of the tribe Levi. (For more on the role of the Levites and the priests, see Numbers 1:48-54; 3–4). This clan of the priests was headed up by Aaron. Therefore, sometimes God speaks to Moses and Aaron together (e.g. Lev. 11:1).

A key function of the Tent of Meeting with its altar was that it was the place where the Israelites brought their offerings. Chapters 1–7 tell them what offerings / sacrifices there are, and how to carry them out.

But Israel's service for the LORD is not limited to the service at the Tent of Meeting. It permeates their whole life. This means they have to distinguish between what is clean and unclean, and between the common / ordinary / profane and the holy [key terms!]. Normally, people and things are pure / clean. Some animals always count as unclean. Clean people and things can become impure / unclean under certain circumstances. Uncleanliness is not the same as physical dirt. Nor does it mean there is sin involved necessarily. [Speak of "ritual purity" if that is helpful.] But in some way, people, animals or things do not meet the ideal standard. (Purity is the state of being acceptable, and being clean is what allows a person or thing to be in the presence of God. By contrast, impurity occurs when an ideal state has been violated.) Impurity is contagious, so to speak. Thus such people have to be purified / cleansed. The rules about what is impure, and how purification has to happen, are given in chapters 11–15. When somebody or something is to be used in the service of God, it has to be made holy / consecrated / sanctified. What was common becomes holy / dedicated, or "reserved for God", as it were.

Further, God is not only concerned with ritual purity. He demands a moral lifestyle. His people should distinguish themselves from other nations (18:3). What this means is explained / recorded in chapters 17–25. This includes worshipping the LORD as the only God, honoring the parents, concern for the poor, the prohibition of incest, and of fraud in business, the observance of certain festivals, including the Year of Rest and the Year of Release, and love for your neighbor. [Pick rules that are particularly relevant, either because they are familiar and agreeable to the typical reader, or because they are unexpected and controversial.] [And/Or: Chapter 19 is a remarkable blend of instructions about religious, moral, social, and cultic matters. / Add?: Jesus's famous words "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" are a quotation from Lev. 19:18.]

An overarching theme in Leviticus is the holiness of God, and of his name (e.g. 18:21). God lives / resides in the Tent of Meeting. This Tent is placed at the center of the camp. Because the holy God is personally present among the people, they have to be / live holy (11:44 [key verse]). But they induce impurity, and they commit sin. This affects the sanctuary, and that is dangerous. Therefore, the sanctuary needs to be cleansed from its impurity, and the people need to be freed from their sin. This happens on the Day of Atonement. It was the year's most important festival. Lev. 16 describes its rituals. This meaningful occasion is (roughly) the center piece of the book [and thus central to the whole *Torah*].

“Atoning” [key term] is needed in three respects: (1) in order to purify / cleanse from severe impurity / pollution / defilement (e.g. 14:20); (2) for the sake of sanctifying / consecrating people or objects (e.g. 8:15) – be it for the first time, or after profanation / desecration – ; (3) to effectuate forgiveness when there was a violation of the law (e.g. 4:13/20).

Outline

- 1-7 Instructions about offerings & sacrifices
- 8-10 The ordination/dedication of the priests and their first sacrifices
- 11-15 Instructions about (ritual) purity
- 16 The Day of Atonement
- 17-20 Instructions about (daily) holy (moral) living (& holy worship)
- 21-25 Instructions on priests and festivals
- 26 Blessings and curses
- 27 (Appendix:) Vows on dedicating people & things to the LORD

Additional note:

Composition

- 1–7 Offerings (approaching God)
 - 8–10 Ordination of priests
 - 11-15 Rules on **ritual purity**
 - 16 Day of Atonement
 - 18–20 Rules on **holy living** / moral laws
 - 21–22 Rules for priests
- 23–25 Festivals *and more* (approaching God)
- 26 Blessings & curses
- 27 Appendix: Vows

Some see a chiasmic structure. I see that too, but it cannot be pressed too hard, it does not unfold totally systematically, especially not in the second half.

Some take ch. 17 (themes: slaughtering only at the sanctuary / eating blood prohibited) together with ch. 16.

Chs. 17-20 tie in with the theme of “Living as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” – Exod. 19:6.

Ch. 27 is an appendix, because vows are voluntary, in contrast to everything that was talked about before, which was all mandatory (so Keil).