

Pentateuch

Time & Place in Leviticus & Numbers

*Peter Schmidt, 2021*

Date	Event	Reference
<b>1. YEAR</b>		
<b>1. Month</b>		
14./15. Day	Passover and Exodus from Egypt	Exod. 12:2, 6, 29, 31
<b>3. Month[?]</b>		
14. Day[?] <sup>1</sup>	Arrival at Sinai	Exod. 19:1
	Covenant; Golden Calf; Making of Tabernacle	
	<i>Instructions</i> for ordination of priests (cf. Lev. 8)	Exod. 29
<b>2. YEAR</b>		
<b>1. Month</b>		
1. Day	Erection of the Tent of Meeting	Exod. 40:17, 33
1. Day	The cloud covers the Tent of Meeting	Exod. 40:34
1.–12. Day	Tribal chiefs' offerings	<b>Num. 7:1ff., 12ff.</b>
?	Setting up of the lamps	<b>Num. 8:1-4</b>
14. Day	Passover	<b>Num. 9:1-5</b>
	The Lord addresses Moses from the Tent of Meeting; he gives him <i>instructions on sacrifices</i>	Lev. 1:1; Lev. 1–7
(7 days)	Ordination of the priests (cf. Exod. 29)	Lev. 8
(8. day)	First sacrifices by the priests	Lev. 9
	Illicit offering by Nadab & Abihu; they die	Lev. 10
	The Lord continues with <i>instructions on purity</i>	Lev. 11–15
	Instructions on Day of Atonement, given in the aftermath of Aaron's sons' death (cf. Lev. 10)	Lev. 16
	The Lord's <i>instructions on holy living</i> etc.	Lev. 17–27
<b>2. Month</b>		
1. Day	Census of eleven tribes (about 1 week?)	Num. 1
	Levites claimed as assistants to priests	Num. 3:5-9
	Census of Levites	Num. 3:14-39
	Firstborns redeemed, Levites given to God	Num. 3:40-51
	Dedication of the Levites; they take up service	Num. 8:5-22
14. Day	Belated Passover	(cf. Num. 9:6-14)
	The cloud leading the Israelites day & night (with reference to its first appearance)	Num. 9:15-23 (cf. Exod. 40:34)
20. Day	Departure from Sinai	Num. 10:11

<sup>1</sup> The date is uncertain. The temporal phrases in Exod. 19:1 are difficult to interpret.

## Introduction

Mainly, I want to make these points:

- The few events that are reported in Leviticus, and the revelations from God to Moses that make up all the rest of the book, probably happened in the 1. month of the 2. year at Sinai (not at some unspecified time during the 1. year).
- In Leviticus, the phrase בְּהַר סִינַי *b<sup>h</sup>har Sînāy* should be translated “at Mount Sinai”, not “on Mount Sinai”.
- In Numbers, chapter 7 (and perhaps more) is a flashback.

## Do the assumed time & location matter for translation?

They could.

- If matters of timing and location are addressed in the book introduction, we need to be clear about what we can confidently say, and what we can only suppose.
- A mistranslation of the above-mentioned phrase בְּהַר סִינַי can easily cause unnecessary confusion.
- Translators might want to mark a flashback or an interruption as such, but this has to be done with care. Equally important is that we do not use a conjunction signalling temporal sequence (“and then ...”), where this is not warranted.

## Remarks about the table

**In short: In Exodus, God spoke to Moses on the mountain top for making the covenant, and for revealing to him what the Tabernacle should look like. In Leviticus, God spoke to Moses from the Tent of Meeting and instructed him about offerings, purity, and holiness.**

Leviticus “happened” at Sinai. Actually, it contains mostly instructions *given* at Sinai, and only few events. But when were the revelations given? The table shows the order of events, as far as we can determine it. What I want to show is that Leviticus likely belongs into the 1. month of the 2. year. This means, we probably do not need to be so vague as to say that Leviticus was given at any unknown time during the approximately yearlong stay at Sinai.

God’s plan for the **Levites** to replace the firstborn sons in the service for him, and their census, are reported in Num. 3. The Levites’ dedication – which is undated – is reported in Num. 8. That account contains the order for them to bring sacrifices (Num. 8:12) and to stand “in front of Aaron and his sons” (v. 13). Thus the **priesthood** must have assumed their role already before that. Therefore, **Lev. 8–10 (purple block) must be placed before the dedication of the Levites.** The priests’ ordination could have happened in the 1. month, or at an earlier time in the 2. month. (Consequently, when the priests brought their first offerings in Lev. 9, this must have happened without any assistance from the side of the Levites.)

**We cannot tell whether the ordination of the priests (purple block) or the census of the Levites (dark orange block) took place first.** The table shows all material of Lev. together, because there is no compelling reason to divide it. This means, though, that the priests are ordained before the census of the Levites (who include the priests) was carried out. This is well possible. In Num. 4:5, the Aaronites, that is, the priests, are already a group by themselves, contrasted even with the other Kohathites (to who they belong).

Lev. 16 is connected to Lev. 10. Whether this means that the chapters in between, Lev. 11–15, were actually revealed after ch. 16, is impossible to determine. The order as it stands is possible.

In terms of **literary arrangement**, the text of **Leviticus** says four times that God revealed it to Moses “at Sinai” (see special remark below). These revelations are only interrupted by the account about the priests’ ordination etc. (ch. 8–10).<sup>2</sup>

If the priests were dedicated in ch. 8, and **Aaron brought his first sacrifices in ch. 9, this presumes that the Tabernacle was operational** (not only the altar – see 8:3 “assemble all the congregation at the doorway of the tent of meeting”). Therefore, Lev. 8 cannot have happened during the 1. year at Sinai, when the Tabernacle was not yet set up.

Lev. 1:1 says the LORD talked to Moses from the Tent. (This refers at least to the instructions about the sacrifices – chs. 1–5.) Theoretically, the Tent could be Moses’s provisional Tent of Meeting outside the camp, as in Exod. 33:7, but this is unlikely, because **Lev. 1:1 follows closely after Exod. 40:34-38, where the “real” Tent of Meeting was erected, and it seems logical that the Lord would now use this Tent to meet Moses. And the scene is never altered** (except that sometimes Moses and Aaron are addressed together). Therefore, probably, all the instructions on the sacrifices (chs. 1–7), on purity (chs. 11–15), and on holy living (chs. 17–27) were given not some time during the 1. year at Mt. Sinai, but in the 1. or 2. month of the 2. year. The chapter on the Day of Atonement (ch. 16) explicitly links to the death of Nadab and Abihu, reported in ch. 10. Admittedly, one could argue that some other passages became relevant only at a later time, and might have been given later.

As to the dating: Not every detail can be determined with certainty. God could have told Moses the content of this book any time after the 1. day of the 1. month. But presumably the instructions about the sacrifices were given before the priests brought their first sacrifices. And that took one week. And the beginning of the 2. month was taken up by executing the census. This makes the second half of the 1. month a likely time.

The **incident regarding the blasphemer** and his sentence (Lev. 24:10-23) – the only narrative section in Lev. besides chs. 8–10 – does not mention the Tent of Meeting or the Tabernacle. It could have taken place any time during the 1. year at Sinai. That this pericope is inserted in one of the last chapters of Lev. makes that somewhat unlikely. On the other hand, nothing compels us to place the event in the first two months of the 2. year.

As to the sequence of the texts in **Numbers**, chronological order is not the top criterion. At least ch. 7 with its report about the tribal chiefs’ offerings is a flashback. A pluperfect might be appropriate, here and in a few other places. For 7:1, see NET08, ESVUS16, NRSV. For Num. 9:15 – which also looks back to an earlier event – no English version provides a model. GCLNR00 does not use pluperfect either, but signals how the one-time event becomes a pattern:

An dem Tag, als das Heilige Zelt, die Wohnstätte des Bundesgesetzes, zum ersten Mal aufgerichtet wurde, senkte sich die Wolke darauf herab, und am Abend wurde sie zu einem Feuerschein, der bis zum Morgen leuchtete. So blieb es von nun an: Bei Tag stand die Wolke über der Wohnung des Herrn und bei Nacht der Feuerschein.

(= ... the cloud came down onto it ... From now on, it kept being like that: ...)

I would suggest something like this (slightly changing NRSV):

<sup>15</sup> On the day the tabernacle had been set up, the cloud had covered the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant; since then, from evening until morning it was over the tabernacle, having the appearance of fire. <sup>16</sup> (Now) It was always so: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night.

There are other sections in Num. 1–10 that are a bit difficult to put into chronological order. I do not discuss these here. For one more case, see the section on Num 8:1-4 below.

We find that, although Israel camped at Sinai for about a year, it was not until the last few weeks, before the worship service at the Tabernacle took full shape.

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<sup>2</sup> Notably, the speech introduction formulas in Leviticus show that Aaron is not addressed by the Lord except in 10:8, and a few more times beginning at 11:1ff. – that is, only after he has been made priest.

### **“On” or “at” Sinai?**

The name Sinai occurs five times in Lev. – four times as *b<sup>h</sup>har Sînāy* (7:38; 25:1; 26:46; 27:34), and in 7:38 also in the expression *b<sup>h</sup>midbar Sînāy* ‘in the wilderness of Sinai’. The question arises whether *b<sup>h</sup>har Sînāy* means “at/near Sinai”, or “on (the top of) Sinai”, and whether this is meant to be in contrast to the LORD’s speaking in the Tent, and whether different sections of the book of Lev. were communicated in different places. **Since the phrase is always the same, it should also be understood the same way, and probably be translated “at Sinai”, not “on Sinai”. Saying “on” could be confused with God’s speaking to Moses when he ascended alone to the mountain top (in Exodus), and that is probably not meant.**

I think we need to distinguish the two locations on top of the mountain Sinai and at its foot. The people camped at the foot of the mountain. Exod. 19:1-2 says (NASB):

<sup>1</sup> In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. <sup>2</sup> When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain [so most EVV; GNTD: “at the foot of Mount Sinai”; Hebrew: *neged hāhār* ‘in front of the mountain’].

The LORD and Moses met on the top of the mountain: Exod. 19:20 says (NASB):

The Lord came down on Mount Sinai [*על־הַר סִינַי*], to the top of the mountain; and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

See also Exod. 34:2 (NASB):

So be ready by morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai [*אֶל־הַר סִינַי*], and present yourself there to Me on the top of the mountain [*על־רֶאשׁ הַהָר*].

See also Exod. 24:16. Note the preposition ‘*al*’.

Now, it is true that the preposition *b<sup>h</sup>* can also be used for the same situation. Exod. 31:18 says (NASB):

When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai [*בְּהַר סִינַי*], He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.

Cf. Exod. 34:32 (NASB):

Afterward all the sons of Israel came near, and he commanded them to do everything that the Lord had spoken to him on Mount Sinai [*בְּהַר סִינַי*].

But **it is important to recognize that the preposition *b<sup>h</sup>* can mean “at”,** even though the basic meaning is “in”. IBHS § 11.2.5. gives “in / at / on”; BHRG § 39.6.1. gives “in / on / near [a path]”. JM § 133c. notes it “is sometimes used for simple proximity”. For the meaning “at / by”, see 1Sam. 29:1; 2Ki. 25:13b; Ezek. 10:15. So, in theory, both “on Mount Sinai” and “at Mount Sinai” are possible. Nevertheless, when the phrase *b<sup>h</sup>har Sînāy* is used in Leviticus, it should be rendered “at” Sinai, because in Lev. 1:1 we read that the LORD spoke to Moses “from the tent of meeting”, that is, he has not climbed the mountain.

The Handbook, commenting on Lev. 25:1, says:

Some translators may wish to change the structure of verse 1 by saying something like “When Moses was on Mount Sinai, the LORD said....”

On the other places, it does not comment. Thus, it endorses RSV and TEV, who both consistently translate “on Mount Sinai” – which is questionable.

Now, Lev. 7:38 says (NASB):

which the Lord commanded Moses at Mount Sinai in the day that He commanded the sons of Israel to present their offerings to the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai.

Here, one could ask: if the wilderness of Sinai is mentioned separately, does that not speak for *b<sup>h</sup>har Sînāy* being more specific, namely really “on Mount Sinai”? But no matter whether we say “on Mount Sinai” or “at Mount Sinai”, in both cases we have a double identification with “in the wilderness of Sinai”. Hartley (WBC, 1992) says this is to stress that the Israelites began their sacrificing during the sojourn in Sinai. He has no problem with translating “at

Mount Sinai”, also in the comment. But in 25:1, he translates “at”, but in the comment switches to “on”, without discussion. In 27:34 he translates “on”.

Sklar (TOTC<sub>2</sub>, 2013) addresses the issue at 7:37-38 and at 25:1. He thinks that the section that begins in Lev. 1:1 (given at the Tent) only extends through 6:7 [MT 5:26], and that 6:8 – 7:36 were given on the mountain – “possibly at the same time as the priestly ordination instructions of Exodus 29”. As for chapters 25–27, he says they were also given “on” Sinai, “not later at the tent of meeting, where most of Leviticus was given (1:1; cf. at 7:37-38)”. I do not find this convincing. One big problem with this view is that the more specific instructions in chapters 6–7 would be given earlier than the more basic instructions in chapters 1–5.

Harrison (TOTC<sub>1</sub>, 1980), at 25:1, speaks of “on Mount Sinai”. The NIV Study Bible, in its Note on Lev. 1:1, says that “the contents of Leviticus were given to Moses by God at Mount Sinai”.

This is how three **German versions** render the phrase (“auf” = on; “am” = at):

	HFA (2015)	NLT (2017)	NeÜ (2020)
בְּהַר סִינַי			
7:38	auf dem Berg Sinai	auf dem Berg Sinai	auf dem Berg Sinai
25:1	auf dem Berg Sinai	auf dem Sinai	auf dem Berg Sinai
26:46	auf dem Berg Sinai	am Berg Sinai	auf dem Berg Sinai
27:34	am Berg Sinai	am Berg Sinai	auf dem Berg Sinai
בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי			
7:38	... in der Wüste	in der Wüste ...	in der Wüste Sinai

Apart from the questionable rendering with “auf” (on), it is not understandable why in HFA and NLT the preposition is rendered differently in different places.

Egelkraut, in presenting the setting of Leviticus and after discussing the translation of *b<sup>2</sup>*, remarks:

Dass Jahwe aus dem Zelt sprach, steht somit nicht im Gegensatz zum Berg Sinai, denn die Präposition macht es nicht nötig, dass es auf dem Berge war, sondern am bzw. im Umfeld des Berges bzw. der Landschaft Sinai.<sup>3</sup>

(= That Yahweh speaks from the Tent stands thus in no contrast to mount Sinai, because the preposition does not necessitate that it happened on the mountain, but at, or in the vicinity of the mountain or the region Sinai.)

### **Where does Num 8:1-4 (Setting Up the Lamps) belong?**

The *Handbook* explains:

The writer may have placed this section here because the previous verse refers to Moses speaking with the LORD in the Tabernacle. ... Rashbam, a rabbi and commentator from the Middle Ages, already suggested another possible reason for this section: Even though all the other tasks associated with the construction of the Tent of Meeting had already been completed, the task of lighting the lampstand was an ongoing duty. 7.89 describes an ongoing practice as well.

Connecting 8:1 to the *previous* section by “Then the LORD spoke to Moses ...” (NASB) then is justified.

8:5 should then better *not* be begun with “Then the LORD said to Moses ...” (NLT07) / “Then the LORD spoke to Moses” (NET08), because what that pericope reports might not have happened until a month or so later, after the census.

<sup>3</sup> Helmuth Egelkraut, *Das Alte Testament: Entstehung – Geschichte – Botschaft*. 5. rev. ed. (based on *Old Testament Survey – The Message, Form and Background of the Old Testament*; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), (Giessen: Brunnen, 2012), p. 228, n.7.