

Leviticus

Divine Inspiration

In the Book of Leviticus, there are 38 specific mentions of God speaking to Moses and Aaron. This affirms the divine inspiration of this Book.

Setting

The Book was written when the people of Israel were camped at Mount Sinai, for almost 12 months. (Compare Exodus 19:1 to Numbers 10:12.)

Date

The Book of Leviticus was written during the first month of the second year after the exodus from Egypt. (Compare Exodus 40:17 to Numbers 1:1.) This was about 1445 B.C.

Name of the Book

In the original Hebrew Bible, the Book of Leviticus was called “wayyigra” which means “and He (the Lord) called”.¹ This title relates to the fact that God called the Israelites to be His adopted sons and daughters and to have a personal covenantal, holy and obedient relationship to Him.

The English title of the book – “Leviticus” – comes from the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament. “Leviticus” is a describing word for “the Levitical (book)” or “the book pertaining to the Levites”.²

Intended audience

The Book of Leviticus has many instructions for the Israelite priests, for example Leviticus 8:1-10:20. But note Leviticus 26:46 and 27:34 emphasise that the Book of Leviticus was intended for the nation of Israel as a whole and every individual Israelite within it. The commandments about animal sacrifices had parts that only the priests could fulfil. But ordinary Israelites still needed to know what God had instructed the priests.

God had a specific function for Mosaic Covenant priests. But He never intended that the priests be the only ones who knew His will.

¹ La Sor et al, page 81.

² Ibid.

The Levites

The Levites were descendants of Levi who was one of the twelve sons of Jacob (see Genesis 39:34). Aaron was descended from Levi and was chosen by God as the first High Priest of Israel (see Exodus 28:1-4). God chose all of Aaron's descendants as His priests (see Exodus 28:1-12 and 29:1-35). God appointed the rest of the descendants of Aaron in the worship of God at the Tabernacle (see Numbers 3:5-10).

The main purpose of Leviticus

The main purpose of the Book of Leviticus is to give comprehensive details of many of the *terms* and *conditions* of the Mosaic Covenant. Here is an overview of these terms and conditions:

1. There are many of *God's gracious merciful promises* in Leviticus. For example, He guarantees He will forgive the Israelites of their wrongdoings³ on the basis of atonement – the removal of the guilt and associated punishment the Israelites deserved because of their sins. Such atonement was achieved through the sacrifices of animals who died as substitutes for humans who deserved to be punished with death because of their sins (see Romans 1:32 and 6:23). Such animal sacrifices did not achieve atonement themselves but were symbols of Jesus' future atoning death on the Cross (see Hebrews 10:1-10). Substitution was symbolised by the placing of their hand on the head of the sacrificed animal.⁴

In Leviticus 26:40-45, God in His wonderful grace and mercy promised to restore Israelites to a covenantal and personal relationship to Him if they turned from their sins back to Him. This is despite the fact they had previously turned to evil and away from Him.
2. The Book of Leviticus contains many of *God's commandments, statutes and laws* for the people of Israel. Leviticus 26:46 summarises previous chapters by saying: ***“These are the statutes and judgments and laws which the Lord made between Himself and the children of Israel on Mount Sinai by the hand of Moses.”*** Leviticus 27:34 also summarises previous sections: ***“These are the commandments which the Lord commanded Moses for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai.”*** These commands, statutes and laws were divided into these major sections:
 - a) Laws about sacrificial offerings (Leviticus 1:1-7:38).
 - b) Laws about the priests of the Mosaic Covenant (Leviticus 8:1-10:20).
 - c) Laws about purification in relation to foods, women after childbirth, skin diseases/ceremonially unclean discharges from the body (Leviticus 11:1-15:33).
 - d) Laws for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:1-34).
 - e) Laws and exhortations concerning holiness (Leviticus 17:1-22:33). These commands related to animal sacrifices, eating blood or carcasses, sex, the behaviour of priests and offerings to God.

³ See Leviticus 4:20, 4:26, 4:31, 4:35, 5:10, 5:13, 5:16, 5:18, 6:7 and 19:22.

⁴ See Leviticus 1:4, 3:2, 3:8, 3:13, 4:4, 4:15, 4:24, 4:29 and 4:33.

- f) Laws about the feasts, the Tabernacle, the Year of Jubilee and the Land of Canaan (Leviticus 23:1-25:55).
 - g) Laws concerning vows, tithes and offerings (Leviticus 27:1-34).
3. In Leviticus 26:1-46, there is *a statement of the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience* to God's covenant and its associated commandments and statutes.

God's Presence

The Book of Leviticus taught Israelites under the Mosaic Covenant, God's Presence was going to be especially manifested in the Holy of Holies or Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle (see Leviticus 9:6, 9:23-24, 10:2-3 and 16:2). Leviticus 16:2 records: ***“and the Lord said to Moses: ‘Tell Aaron your brother not to come at simply any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud above the mercy seat.’”*** Leviticus 9:23-24 states: ***“And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting, and came out and blessed the people. Then the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people, and fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.”*** In Hebrew, the word ***“tabernacle”*** is ***“miskan”*** which means ***“dwelling place”***.⁵

Exodus 25:8 records God said: ***“And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.”***

Godly Israelites living under the Mosaic Covenant understood that God's Presence was never just limited to being in the Tabernacle or in the later Temple (see Psalm 139:7-9, 1 Kings 8:27, 2 Chronicles 2:6, 6:18 and Isaiah 66:1). But despite this, there were special manifestations of God's Presence at the Tabernacle. For example, Exodus 33:7-11 states: ***“Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the Lord went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the Lord talked with Moses. All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door. So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.”***

God's Presence was a gift of grace and not a merited reward

In Exodus 29:38-46, God promised that under the Mosaic Covenant He would dwell among the Israelites and manifest His Presence in the Tabernacle as an act of *His grace*. This is an act of unmerited grace because in these verses God links His dwelling in the Tabernacle to there being continual atoning burnt offerings at the door of the Tabernacle. Exodus 29:42-46 records: ***“This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet you to speak with you. And there***

⁵ Vine, page 254 and Green, page 147.

I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by My glory. So I will sanctify the tabernacle of meeting and the altar. I will also sanctify both Aaron and his sons to minister to Me as priests. I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them. I am the Lord their God.”

The atoning burnt offerings were continual reminders that the Israelites did not deserve to enter God’s glorious Presence. If the Israelites had to merit or earn God’s Presence in the Tabernacle, they could never have achieved this. Their sins made them deserving of being continually cut off from God’s Presence (see Romans 6:23 and Isaiah 59:2).

In Exodus 33:12-19, God promised that His Presence would go with the Israelites in Moses’ time even though they were so sinful. In verse 19, God emphasises how gracious and compassionate He was: ***“The He said, ‘I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.’”***

God’s Presence was also conditional to some extent

But in Leviticus 26:1-13, God also says He would continue to dwell among the Israelites if they obeyed all His statutes and commandments. In Leviticus 26:3 and 11-13, He promised: ***“If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them...I will set My tabernacle among you, and My soul shall not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; I have broken the bands of your yoke and made you walk upright.”***

Only Jesus perfectly obeyed all of God’s commands and statutes (see Matthew 5:17). He obeyed all of the Mosaic laws without needing to obey any of its commands related to obtaining forgiveness for sin.

But Israelites under the Mosaic Covenant could fulfil Leviticus 26:1-13 in a different sense. They could mostly obey the Mosaic commands and statutes not related to obtaining forgiveness and also obey those Mosaic laws relevant to obtaining forgiveness whenever they disobeyed the commands which were unrelated to obtaining forgiveness. Such a fulfilling of the Mosaic Law could never totally merit or deserve God’s Presence and blessings as rewards but had to be an expression of God’s undeserved grace and mercy *conditioned* on human response.

The Bible, however, does not qualify or specify:

1. what percentage of Israelites had to be walking in relative obedience to the Mosaic Covenant commands and statutes
2. how obedient each Israelite had to be to these commands

for them to fulfil the condition of continuing to see God’s Presence manifested in the Tabernacle.

For example, in Moses’ time, God’s Presence continued to manifest in the Tabernacle despite the fact that most of the Israelites were not walking in faith and resulting obedience to God (see Exodus 32:1-33:17). A similar thing happened in the times of some of the evil Kings of Judah. But in the time of Ezekiel, God’s Presence left the Holy of Holies in His Temple (see

Ezekiel 10:1-22). It is difficult for us to compare the different levels of obedience to God and sinful acts of the generations of Israelites under Moses to those in Ezekiel's time.

God's Presence was manifested differently under different covenants

Note that God manifested His Presence differently

- prior to the Mosaic Covenant and
- during the New Covenant.

Prior to the Mosaic Covenant, God's Presence was not manifested specifically at just one place. It was manifested in many different locations spasmodically at different times (see Genesis 12:7, 17:1, 18:1, 32:22-30 and 35:9).

From the time the New Covenant began, God's Presence was manifested everywhere on Earth and not mainly at the Jewish Tabernacle or Temple. The tearing of the veil of the Temple from top to bottom indicated this (see Matthew 27:51).

The main themes of Leviticus

The Book of Leviticus has a number of main themes. These are:

1. *God is holy.* ⁶ Leviticus 11:44-45 declares: ***“For I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore sanctify yourselves and you shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth. For I am the Lord who brings up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”*** The same type of wording is used in Leviticus 19:2, 20:26 and 21:8. The same emphasis continued into the New Testament. In 1 Peter 1:15-16, Peter wrote: ***“but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’”*** The word ***“holy”*** was used *89 times* in the Book of Exodus.
2. Humans *frequently commit intentional and unintentional sin* (see Leviticus 1:1-17 and 4:1-7:10). The words ***“sin”***, ***“sinned”***, ***“sinning”*** and ***“sins”*** were used *110 times* in the Book of Leviticus. Leviticus had more usages of the word ***“sin”*** than any other book in the Old or New Testaments. The reason was Leviticus:
 - a) emphasised how sinful humans are
 - b) provided God's answer to sin and associated guilt.
3. Because God is perfectly holy and humans are sinful, the only way humans could have a personal relationship with God and enter His Presence was for *an atoning substitute to die in place of guilty humans*. Hebrews 9:22 teaches: ***“And according to the law almost all things are purged with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.”*** The Book of Leviticus frequently stated that the death of the animal related to atonement and forgiveness for sinning guilty humans. The word ***“atonement”*** was used *49 times* in

⁶ See Leviticus 19:2, 20:3, 20:26, 21:8 and 22:32.

Leviticus.⁷ This was by far the larger number of mentions of the word “*atonement*” in any book of the Bible. The next highest mentions were in the Books of Exodus (10 times) and Numbers (17 times). Remember though these animal sacrifices were ultimately only effective because of them being symbols of Jesus’ future perfectly atoning death. Leviticus 10:1-3 reveals that if humans try to come to God’s Presence in ways He did not approve, they deserve to die.

4. God is *extremely gracious, kind and merciful*. Even though humans deserved to be punished with all the curses listed in Leviticus 26:14-39, God desired to express His wonderful grace, kindness and mercy towards them. The latter is revealed in the extremely large numbers of mentions of atonement and forgiveness by God in the Book of Leviticus.
5. God wishes to be *reconciled* in His relationship with human beings. The peace offerings especially related to this (see Leviticus 3:1-17 and 7:11-21). These offerings symbolised that Israelites with saving faith in God were no longer His enemies and had peace with Him.
6. Because God is perfectly holy, had forgiven His Mosaic Covenant people of their sins and had set them apart as His holy people (see Deuteronomy 7:6-8), He *promised to empower them to live holy lives*. Leviticus 21:8 stated: “...***I am the Lord who sanctify you...***”
7. Even though He promised to empower His Mosaic Covenant people to live holy lives, He expected them also *to willingly obey His commands under the Mosaic Covenant*. Leviticus 20:8 taught this in perfect balance: “***And you shall keep My statutes, and perform them: I am the Lord who sanctifies you.***” Leviticus 22:31-32 taught similarly: “***Therefore you shall keep My commandments, and perform them: I am the Lord, you shall not profane My holy name, but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you.***”
8. Part of living a holy life involves *not following the wicked ungodly customs and ethical standards of unbelievers*. Leviticus 18:1-3 records: “***Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: “I am the Lord your God. According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances.”’***” Leviticus 18:30 commanded: “***Therefore you shall keep My ordinance, so that you do not commit any of these abominable customs which were committed before you, and that you do not defile yourselves by them: I am the Lord your God.***”
Under the New Covenant, some of God’s commands, rules and instructions are different from what He commanded the Israelites under the Mosaic Covenant. But despite this, there is a similar emphasis on not following the wicked customs and standards of the world: “***And do not be conformed to this world...***”
Many modern Christians have changed this commandment into: “And be conformed to this world by twisting the Bible to fit in with the world’s customs and ethical standards.”
9. *How to worship God* under the Mosaic Covenant. The Book of Leviticus taught the Israelites to give grain offerings (see Leviticus 2:1-16), peace offerings (see Leviticus 3:1-17) and to hold seven feasts. These feasts were

⁷ See Leviticus 1:4, 4:20, 4:26, 4:31, 4:35, 5:6, 5:10, 5:13, 5:16, 5:18, 6:7, 7:7, 8:34, 9:7 (twice), 10:17, 12:7, 12:8, 14:18, 14:19, 14:20, 14:21, 14:29, 14:31, 14:53, 15:15, 15:30, 16:6, 16:10, 16:11, 16:16, 16:17 (twice), 16:18, 16:24, 16:27, 16:30, 16:32, 16:33 (three times), 16:34, 17:11 (twice), 19:22, 23:27, 23:28 (twice) and 25:9.

- a) the Passover Feast (see Leviticus 23:4-5)
 - b) the Feast of Unleavened Bread (see Leviticus 23:6)
 - c) the Feast of Firstfruits (see Leviticus 23:9-14)
 - d) the Feast of Pentecost or Weeks (see Leviticus 23:15-22)
 - e) the Feast of Trumpets (see Leviticus 23:23-25)
 - f) the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 23:26-32)
 - g) the Feast of Tabernacles (see Leviticus 23:33-43).
10. God instructs His people to *love others*. Leviticus 19:18 commands: “...**but you shall love your neighbor as yourself...**” Leviticus 19:34 commands God’s people also to love strangers. Despite what some may wrongly imagine, the Book of Leviticus is not a set of loveless laws.
11. What were *God’s standards about sex*. Leviticus Chapter 18 lists God’s standards about incest (verses 6-18), adultery (verse 20), homosexuality (verse 22), having sex with animals (verse 23) and immodest exposures of our nudity (verses 6 to 18). Leviticus Chapter 20 lists the penalties which God commanded for these sexual sins. In Leviticus 18:3, God commanded the Israelites not to follow the sexual customs and standards of the pagan Egyptians and Canaanites. In Leviticus 18:24-30, God says that one of the reasons He was going to punish the Canaanites who lived in the land, was they practiced incest, adultery, homosexuality, having sex with animals and immodestly exposed their nudity to members of the opposite sex who should not have seen it. Leviticus 18:24-25 says: “**Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you. For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants.**” God’s sexual laws were one of the main areas where God tested His people’s faithfulness to Him.
12. Under the Old Covenant, God’s people were *His servants* or *love slaves*. In Leviticus 25:55, God declared: “**For the children of Israel are servants to Me; they are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.**” This is similar to under the New Covenant, God’s people are His servants and love slaves (see Romans 6:22 and 1 Peter 2:16).

Extra points about Leviticus

Note the following extra points about Leviticus:

1. Most of the commands and statutes to the nation of Israel under the Mosaic Covenant found in the Book of Leviticus do not apply to believers under the New Covenant. But some of the laws which have been transferred to the New Covenant and New Testament are:
 - a) the *law of love for our neighbour* (see Leviticus 19:18 and 34). This command is transferred to the New Covenant in verses like Matthew 22:39, Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, 1 John 2:7-11 and 3:10-18.

- b) the command: ***“You shall therefore be holy because I am holy”*** (see Leviticus 11:44-45, 19:2 and 20:7). This command is transferred to the New Covenant in 1 Peter 1:15-16.
 - c) the *command against eating or drinking blood* (see Leviticus 17:10-14). This is transferred to the New Covenant in Acts 15:1-29.
 - d) the *commands against sexual immorality* (see Leviticus 18:1-18, 20 and 22-23). This includes commands against incest, adultery, homosexuality and having sex with animals. These are transferred to the New Covenant in Acts 15:1-29.
2. God gave the whole of the tribe of Levi the task of acting as priests or assistants to the priests. This means that approximately *1 in 12* Israelites were priests or assistants to priests. In one sense, all the Israelites were appointed as priests (see Exodus 19:6). But only the tribe of Levi had special priestly duties at God’s Tabernacle.
 3. Leviticus 25:23-34 instructed that any land which was sold to others was given back to their original owners at the end of each 50 years at the Year of Jubilee. This was except if the place sold was a house in a walled city (see Leviticus 25:30-31).
 4. Leviticus 25:35-38 instructed all the Israelites to care for the poor among them.
 5. Leviticus 25:39-53 contains laws related to slavery. These were more human laws than the laws governing slavery in pagan nations.
 6. Leviticus 10:11 instructed the Israelite priests to *teach God’s people His Word*. This was a very important command because of what Jesus said in Matthew 4:4: ***“...Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”***