

**A Study Commentary
on
Leviticus**

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Contents

Glossary of linguistic terms	8
Preface	10
Introductory matters	12
The name of the book	13
The structure of the book	13
Authorship and dating: hermeneutics of suspicion	15
Leviticus and the New Testament	17
I. Laws of the offerings (Leviticus 1:1–7:38)	21
The burnt offering (1:1–17)	22
The grain offerings (2:1–16)	30
The peace offerings (3:1–17)	38
The sin offerings (4:1–35)	44
Special cases of the sin offering (5:1–13)	57
The guilt offering (5:14–6:7)	63
Priestly duties in the offerings (6:8–7:10)	68
The peace offerings (7:11–21)	79
Command not to eat fat and blood (7:22–27)	84

The priestly portion (7:28–38)	86
2. Consecration of the priesthood (Leviticus 8:1–10:20)	91
Installation of the priesthood (8:1–36)	92
The initial offerings of the priesthood (9:1–24)	102
The sin of the priests Nadab and Abihu (10:1–7)	123
Further rules for the priesthood (10:8–15)	117
Another priestly error? (10:16–20)	122
3. The Cleanliness Code (Leviticus 11:1–15:33)	125
The Kashrut or dietary laws (11:1–23)	126
Touching the unclean (11:24–47)	138
Cleanliness after childbirth (12:1–8)	146
Initial tests for infectious skin diseases (13:1–8)	151
Chronic skin diseases (13:9–17)	155
Secondary conditions developing into skin infections (13:18–46)	158
Laws concerning mould (13:47–59)	166
Laws of cleansing a person with a skin disease (14:1–32)	170
Laws for the infected house (14:33–57)	177
Discharges that reflect impurity (15:1–33)	183
4. The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:1–34)	192
Yom Kippur (16:1–34)	193
5. The Code of Holiness (Leviticus 17:1–26:46)	207
Laws regarding animal blood (17:1–16)	208
Laws concerning sexual immorality (18:1–30)	215
Sundry laws for holy living (19:1–18)	226
Further statutes of holiness (19:19–37)	235
Capital offences and other serious crime (20:1–27)	243

Priestly rules of holiness (21:1-16)	252
Physical defects among the priesthood (21:16-24)	258
Exhortation to the priesthood (22:1-9)	262
Eating the holy gifts (22:10-16)	265
Rules for animal sacrifice (22:17-33)	269
Laws of the feasts (23:1-44)	274
Lamp and bread of the sanctuary (24:1-9)	287
The blasphemer (24:10-23)	291
The Sabbath year and the year of jubilee (25:1-22)	296
Laws of redemption (25:23-55)	304
Blessings of obedience (26:1-13)	316
Curses for disobedience (26:14-39)	320
Repentance (26:40-46)	328
6. Laws of the vow (Leviticus 27:1-34)	332
Vows of the sanctuary (27:1-34)	333
List of abbreviations	342
Notes	344

I

Laws of the offerings (Leviticus 1:1–7:38)

On the basis of our knowledge of ancient literature, particularly Punic Tariffs, it is clear that this first section of the book of Leviticus is a reference document for the worship rituals of ancient Israel.¹ Tariff documents from as early as the fifth century BC from Carthage and elsewhere are concerned with the amounts to be paid to priests who officiate over sacrifices, and the amount to be kept by the worshippers. Not only are there similarities between the content of these documents and Leviticus 1–7, but some of the phraseology used in both is similar. The point being made is simple: in ancient times there was a genre of prescriptive ritual texts dealing with sacrifice, and Leviticus 1–7 is an example of this. These chapters constitute a directory for sacrifice in the tabernacle / temple of ancient Israel.

The burnt offering (Leviticus 1:1–17)

This opening section of the book of Leviticus spells out in detail the laws regarding the three types of burnt offering. The types are ranked according to the value of the animal, that is, the economic cost to the worshipper: the first category are from the herd; the second from the flock; and the third from the birds. In each case, the victim is killed at the door of the Tent of Meeting, its blood drained off, the unclean parts disposed of, and the portion designated for the offering is burned entirely on the altar.²

1:1–2. Then Yahweh called to Moses, and he spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel, and say to them, “When a man from among you brings an offering to Yahweh, you shall bring your offering of an animal from the herd or from the flock.”’

The book of Leviticus begins with the word ‘Then’. In Hebrew it is the *vav* consecutive, a grammatical device which reflects a temporal sequence with relation to a preceding action and demonstrates the continuation of a consecutive narrative. This means that Leviticus has a connection with the book that precedes it, namely, the book of Exodus.³ The preceding event was, of course, the construction of the tabernacle, which is described in Exodus 25–40. Leviticus now sets out the details of the work and worship that will occur in the tabernacle.

It is ‘Yahweh’ who reveals the laws of the tabernacle. And he presents them to Moses at the tent. This event underscores the role of Moses as covenant mediator: as he stood between God and the people at Sinai (Exod. 19–21), so now he stands between them at the doorway of the Tent of Meeting. In Exodus 40:35 Moses was

not allowed to enter the tabernacle, but now he is summoned to it in order to receive God's revelation.

Two purposes of the tabernacle are displayed in these verses. First, it is where God reveals his Word to his people. And, secondly, the people will come to worship here through sacrifice and the work of the priesthood.⁴ It is to the specific activity of sacrifice that the author now turns. He calls it an 'offering' (Hebrew *qār^lbān*; see Jesus' use of the term in Mark 7:11): the Hebrew word refers to all kinds of oblations or offerings, including animals, vegetables and metals.⁵ Thus we are seeing here a very general statement, perhaps a superscription, the specific details of which will be spelt out in Leviticus 1–7.

It is worth noting that Ugaritic / Canaanite literature depicts its important deity, El, as dwelling in a tent and revealing his wishes by means of oracles.⁶ While some commentators believe that this and other such parallels are examples of Israel appropriating a religious concept from the Canaanites, it is highly unlikely that this is the case. It may in fact be a good example of a polemic against Canaanite religion: El does not live in a tent and give his word; only the true God can do such things!

1:3. *'If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without defect. At the door of the Tent of Meeting he shall offer it, so that he may be accepted in the presence of Yahweh.'*

This first regulation begins with the word 'If'. It is a particle that introduces the conditional element of an 'if ... then' clause. The particle appears frequently in Leviticus, and its purpose is to demonstrate that an offerer has more than one option in what he offers. Regarding the burnt offering in Leviticus 1, the worshipper

has three choices: an animal from the herd (1:3), one from the flock (1:10), or a bird (1:14).

The section before us (1:3–9) describes the burnt offering presented from the ‘herd’. These were the most valuable animals that a person could own in antiquity. In sacrifice, only the best of these animals are to be offered: they must have no ‘defect’. The latter is a typical requirement throughout Leviticus (see, e.g., 1:10; 3:1,6; 4:3), and the particular traits that would constitute such a deficiency are listed in Leviticus 22:17–25. In addition, the offering is to be a ‘male’. This preference is because of the ‘higher value’ that ‘ancient society placed on the male’.⁷

This type of sacrifice is called the *‘ōlāh*, or ‘burnt offering’, and the name derives from a verb that means ‘to ascend’ or ‘go up’. The term probably signifies that the sacrifice is totally consumed on the altar and the resulting smoke ‘goes up’ to God. Perhaps it also refers to the one presenting the sacrifice, who ascends to the altar to make the offering. Indeed, the ritual of burnt offering is to be carried out at the ‘door’ of the tabernacle and, of course, that is where the altar of burnt offering, or sacrifice, is located (see Exod. 38:1–7).⁸

The first purpose of the burnt offering is given here. It is so that the offerer may be ‘accepted’ by God. And it is also a way for the worshipper to honour God. But there is much more to it than that: the term ‘acceptance’ in Hebrew is a cultic, technical one which denotes a sacrifice that has efficacious merit (when carried out in faith) to take care of one’s sins. Thus, God’s acceptance of the sacrifice is understood as acceptance of the one who brings the sacrifice. It is a means of reconciliation between a holy God and an unholy person.

1:4. *‘And he shall set his hand on the head of the burnt offering, so that it may be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.’*

The act of the worshipper in laying his hand on the head of the animal is a common feature of the Israelite sacrificial system (cf. 3:2,8,13; 4:4,15,24,29,33). Some scholars argue that the purpose of this act is transference of guilt or impurity from the person to the animal. The principle of transference is known in the ancient Near East. A Hittite document called *The Ritual of Tunnawi* describes the transfer of fertility from a cow to a human by the laying on of hands (to the cow's horns).⁹ Legal authority is transferred from one person to another in the Bible by the action of laying hands on the person being commissioned (see Num. 27:15–23; Deut. 34:9). When the Israelites lay their hands on one who is guilty of blasphemy, it is a sign that the guilt and responsibility rest with the blasphemer alone and not with the community (24:10–16). An act of transference is most clearly seen in relation to the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement (16:21–22).

Others suggest that there is no real transference, but that the act of laying on hands is merely symbolic. The ritual merely symbolizes acknowledgement of one's sins, and the act is one of identification with the animal.¹⁰ This appears to be the proper interpretation of the action.

The purpose of the burnt offering (and the laying on of hands) is further stated here: 'it is to make atonement for him,' that is, the one presenting the animal. This statement highlights the main function of the sacrifice — to atone for mankind's sins and guilt by an act of substitution. It appears to have both a propitiatory purpose (to stay God's wrath) and an expiatory purpose (to cleanse from sin). No specific sin is mentioned in Leviticus 1 and, thus, one may assume that the burnt offering affects the general disposition of one's fallen nature and character.

This ritual is no light matter. The Hebrew verb 'set' literally means 'to lay [an object] heavily on something' (cf. Ps. 88:7). The

idea is that sin and guilt lie heavily on the worshipper, but now he is setting that weight on the sacrificial animal. Sin indeed rests heavily on its owner!

1:5–6. ‘Then he shall slaughter the young bull before Yahweh. And the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall bring the blood and toss the blood around about the altar that is at the door of the Tent of Meeting. Then he shall skin the burnt offering, and cut it up into pieces.’

The person making the offering has the duty of butchering the sacrificial animal. The verb ‘slaughter’ appears seventy-nine times in the Old Testament, and it is used most often as a technical term for the ritual slaughter of an animal. It probably originally meant ‘to slit the throat’.¹¹ In the present verse, the Septuagint renders the verb in the plural, probably to signify that the killing is to be carried out by the priests, and not by the individual. But there is no justification for that translation.

The worshipper has not finished; he also needs to skin the animal and then cut it into pieces. The hide is not burned, but becomes the property of the priesthood (7:8) — the sole exception to this practice is the sacrifice of the Passover lamb (Exod. 12:10). The purpose of cutting the carcass into pieces is probably so that it could more easily be burned and consumed on the altar.

In the meantime, the priests gather the blood of the animal in vessels at the altar of burnt offering (see Exod. 27:1–8). They then throw it on the sides of the altar for all to see. Some translations say they ‘sprinkle’ the blood on the altar (NIV, NASB), but the Hebrew verb has a more dramatic meaning of ‘toss / splash / dash’.¹²

1:7–9. ‘Then the sons of Aaron, the priest, shall set a fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. Then Aaron’s sons, the priests, shall arrange the

pieces, the head and the fat portions, on the wood that is on the fire that is on the altar. But its inner parts and its legs he shall wash with water. Then the priest shall burn all of it on the altar for a burnt offering as an offering of fire, a pleasing aroma to Yahweh.'

The next duty of the priesthood is to 'arrange', or 'set in order', the means of the sacrifice by making a fire, setting wood on it, and then placing the pieces of the animal on top. This verb is technical terminology used in connection with the religious ceremonial. Included in the sacrifice are the head and 'fat portions'. The latter term probably refers to the fat part over the liver (suet), and it is used elsewhere only in verse 12 and in 8:20. Why these parts are specifically mentioned is unclear, although they may be set apart as particularly belonging to God (cf. 7:25).

At the beginning of verse 9 there is a switch from a plural subject, the priests, to the singular, 'he'. This probably refers to the worshipper. He has the task of washing the viscera and legs of the animal. This action may have been carried out near the laver in the tabernacle courtyard (Exod. 30:17–21), and its purpose was to remove any traces of excrement. The animal must not be unclean (cf. Deut. 23:12–14).

The officiating priest then burns 'all of it' (except the hide). The verb 'burn' used here is literally 'to turn into smoke', thereby demonstrating that the smoke of the sacrifice is ascending from the altar. The burnt offering is 'a pleasing aroma to Yahweh' (cf. 2:12; 3:16; 8:21). The idea of smell, of course, is anthropomorphic. It is, in reality, an ancient Near-Eastern formula used to denote a god's acceptance of a sacrifice. For example, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim describes an offering he makes after having been delivered from a major flood: 'The gods smelled the savour; The gods smelled the sweet savour' (cf. Gen. 8:21).¹³ Thus the idea of

a pleasing aroma means that God is pleased with the sacrifice, and that it has been carried out properly.

1:10–13. *‘But if his offering is from the flock, from the sheep or from the goats, as a burnt offering, he shall offer a male without defect. And he shall slaughter it on the north side of the altar before Yahweh. Then the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall toss the blood around the altar. Then he shall cut it up into pieces with its head and its fat portions. And the priest shall arrange them on the wood that is on the fire upon the altar. But the entrails and the legs he shall wash in water. Then the priest shall offer it all, and burn it on the altar as an offering of fire, a pleasing aroma to Yahweh.’*

The biblical writer now describes the burnt offering of smaller animals, ones from the flock. The ritual is identical to that in verses 3–9, except that some of the details are not repeated: the acts of laying on hands and skinning the animal are noticeably missing. Many commentators argue that such details are to be taken for granted because parallel language and structure dominate. The smaller animals for sacrifice, including the birds of verses 14–17, may reflect the lower economic status of the worshippers. Only the wealthy could truly afford to offer animals from the herd, and others had to offer less valuable stock.

One additional detail is that the animals from the flock are to be butchered on the ‘north side of the altar’. The location may be to distinguish this type of sacrifice from the offering from the herd that is to take place in front of the altar. It may also have a symbolic value: numerous passages denote the north as the direction from which God comes to visit his people (see Ezek. 1:4; Ps. 48:2).¹⁴

1:14–17. *‘But if his offering to Yahweh is from the birds as a burnt offering, then he is to bring his offering from the turtle doves or from the young pigeons.’*

Then the priest shall bring it to the altar, and he shall nip off its head, and burn it on the altar. And its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. And he is to remove its crop with its contents and cast it to the east side of the altar to the place of the fat ashes. Then he shall divide it by its wings, not separating [it totally], and the priest shall burn it on the altar on the wood that is on the fire; it is a burnt offering of fire, a pleasing aroma to Yahweh.'

The final category of burnt offering is the sacrifice of birds. It is the least costly, and it requires only one priest to offer it. It is the burnt offering for the less well-off or the poor. As with the other burnt offerings, both the priest and the worshipper have duties in the ritual. First, the priest kills the bird by severing its head; this act is parallel to the cutting off of the heads of the animals from the herd and flock in preparation for burnt offering (1:8,12). Then the blood of the bird is drained, apparently by squeezing the body against the side of the altar.

The worshipper, the 'he' of the passage, extracts 'the crop' (the Hebrew word, which is a hapax legomenon — i.e. this is the sole occurrence of the term — means 'gullet' or 'stomach') of the bird and 'its contents'. The latter may refer to the entrails, or perhaps excreta. The Septuagint understands it to mean 'feathers', but contextually this makes no sense.¹⁵ This activity is probably a cleanliness law much like those of the earlier washings of the animals from the herds and flocks (1:9,13). The worshipper is then to throw these pieces onto a rubbish heap next to the altar. This is the place where the ashes are dumped after each offering is burned.¹⁶

Application

One must be careful to recognize that the sacrifices of the Old Testament were not in themselves efficacious to cover over

moral transgressions (expiate), or to stay God's wrath from coming on a person (propitiate). Hebrews 10 is quite clear on this matter: 'For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins... Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins' (vv. 4,11). But Old Testament believers were not left without hope. For the Old Testament sacrifices were shadows or types of the atoning work of Christ, and these people obtained forgiveness and acceptance with God only as they offered in true penitence and in faith in the coming Redeemer. And, of course, we as believers today come before the altar not needing a sacrificial animal because Christ has been sacrificed for us — his is an eternal, permanent sacrifice, never to be repeated! We need to know that we 'were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold ... but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:18–19).

One of the purposes of the burnt offering in the Old Testament is to be a 'pleasing' or 'sweet aroma to Yahweh' (see 1:9,13,17). The term that the Septuagint uses for 'sweet aroma' is employed by Paul to describe the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He says in Ephesians 5:2 that Christ '... gave himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God as a fragrant [or "sweet"] aroma'.

The grain offerings (Leviticus 2:1–16)

The author now describes the grain offering, or *min^ehāh*, of ancient Israel. This type of offering could be offered for various reasons, and it could be offered throughout the entire year. It is categorized in Leviticus 2 according to the make-up of the offering. It is very different from the burnt offering in Leviticus 1, primarily because