



Pentateuch 2

In-depth study on Pentateuch

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LEVITICUS



Background

Leviticus (“Leutikos” - Gk) means, “that which pertains to Levi.” Of the Pentateuch, this Book is often the less read, understood and appreciated. One Bible version is reputed to have condensed Leviticus down to a mere two pages. Yet, this “Book of holiness” can be of immeasurable reward to the one who studies and meditates on its contents. It furnishes, for instance, profound insights into the themes of worship, holiness, sacrifice, and redemption. Some scholars go as far as suggesting that certain Bible themes, or even entire Bible Books, like the Book of Hebrews, cannot be properly or fully understand if a knowledge of Leviticus is sparse. This is definitely not a Book to be passed over.

In Exodus we have gained some understanding of the Moral and Civil laws, but now, in Leviticus, we will get to understand much more about the Ceremonial law.

Only two historical Narratives are given in Leviticus -- the story of Nadab and Abihu in Ch.10, and the stoning of the blasphemer in Ch.24. Otherwise, the Book is an excellent “manual of instruction” for the Levitical priests and, in our own time, an excellent manual of the fundamentals and rudiments of holiness, sacrifice and many other great themes. This Book has more direct words from God than other single Book in the Bible, including the gospels. Most of the words from God in Leviticus were heard audibly, and they were written down.

The principal theme of Leviticus is how to live in fellowship with God. Its focus is centred around cleansing and walking in the light. In a nutshell, one could say that the object of the Book is about holy living. As we will see, the entire sacrificial system reveals much about the holiness of God. More importantly, we will be better able to understand what was won by Jesus’ death on the cross. Indeed, Leviticus reveals some of the detailed mechanics of how, and why, it is possible to have the kind of New Testament relationship with God that we can so easily take for granted now.

The significance of Leviticus is, therefore, at least fourfold:

- It gives a revelation of the character of God. God is a holy God, and sin cannot enter into His presence. Hence, a system is presented so as to deal with sin;
- It highlights the importance of maintaining a relationship with God. Man must relate to his Creator, but this relationship can only flourish on His terms. The Levitical laws and the entire Tabernacle system speak much of the method and extent of seeking after God;
- It furnishes additional Civil laws that facilitate relationships between people (e.g., Lev.Ch.19). God is also interested in correct relationships between man and fellow man;
- It draws pictures of the New Covenant era leading up to the second coming of Christ. We see this, for instance, in the Feasts of Israel, the year of Jubilee, and the plan of redemption.

The book follows on chronologically from Exodus 40.33 (“Thus Moses finished the work”), and covers a time period of about one month. The Book of Numbers will then continue the narrative of Israel journeying from Sinai to the plains of Moab just outside Jericho.

Chapters 1 to 17 focus on the Ceremonial laws, while chapters 18 to 27 deal more with some of the civil ramifications of these laws.

Finally, Leviticus is quoted some 40 times in the New Testament, and is particularly quoted in Hebrews. It has always been a highly significant Book, historically, in the Church as it still should be today.

I. The Ground of Fellowship With God (Ch's.1-17)

A. Laws of Offerings (Ch's.1-7).

1. The Burnt Offering (Ch.1)

God wastes no time revealing to Israel just how to maintain relationship with Him. The first chapter deals with the Burnt offerings, which could be from the herd (1.3), from the flock (1.10), or include turtledoves or young pigeons (1.14) -- the latter were offered by Mary and Joseph when dedicating Jesus (Lk. 2.24), and were for the use of poor people.

The Book of worship, fellowship and holiness gets under way, from the very first verse, with the Lord speaking to Moses. God is initiating all, and everything, that is about to come in this fine Book. He reaches down to man and provides a way for him to fellowship with Him.

A number of terms come to light in this chapter, and subsequent chapters, that are crucial for an understanding of the Tabernacle sacrificial procedure. Some of these are now highlighted before continuing with a study of the Feasts.

(i) The concepts of Atonement and Ransom

"Atonement" is the key word of the first chapter. Jesus' death on the cross was also about atonement. Atonement ("kaphar" in Hebrew) means, "cover, to make reconciliation, or to cancel." The whole idea of reconciliation was relational. God wanted to restore relationship and, therefore, took measures to take away or cover those things (sin) separating man from Himself.

Atonement also contains the notion of "ransom." Ransom concerns the price that is paid in order to redeem someone or something. According to the Levitical law, the ransom price is to be paid (in this case, the sacrifice), the guilt covered, and then reconciliation is achieved through making good the injury between the sinner and God. So, in the various Levitical and sacrificial laws, God was finding a way to restore sinful man back into relationship with Him. The process would be repetitive, however, because man kept on sinning and because no single sacrifice was adequate, or sufficient enough, to deal with all sin for all time. But a day would come when one perfect man would pay the ransom price for all mankind once and for all -- and that man was Jesus.

Atonement, therefore, accomplished two things:

- A full provision for sin (though only lasting until the next sin was committed);
- A declaration of man's innocence and holiness (being now legally made right and restored in relationship with the Lord).

The ransom price for redeeming a man's life was a sacrifice. The wages of sin is death (Ro.6.23). This is why a sacrifice had to be made and the blood shed, because the blood constituted the evidence that death had truly taken place. Life is in the blood (Lev.17.11,14, Deut.12.23). The opposite also holds true; the absence of blood equals the absence of life. Only when the blood was shed was the "wage" or "price" truly paid. That is why the blood of Jesus was shed for our sin, for without His shed blood, His life was not given up for us and, therefore, there could be no remission of sin. Already, the Book of Leviticus is beginning to wonderfully explain and illustrate Jesus' sacrifice, shed blood, and atonement on the cross.

(ii) Propitiation

Once the blood is shed, the sin is atoned for (or covered) and the sin is done away with. The Lord would accept the sacrifice, as illustrated in the words, "a soothing aroma to the Lord." This understanding helped to spawn the New Testament theological concept of "propitiation," which means "to appease." Ultimately, Jesus has become our propitiation: "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1Jn.2.2). Most important of all, this appeasement helped restore a relationship with God.

(iii) Substitution

Fortunately, even under the Old Testament dispensation, a man did not have to die for his own sins. An animal or bird, for instance, was allowed to die in his place. This is why the sacrifice was called a "substitutionary" sacrifice. Jesus has since died on our behalf, and became our substitutionary sacrifice. Hence, man is spared having to pay his own debt with his own life. What a wonderful provision of God! Who would want to refuse it? Why die for your own sins? Or, do we listen to the doubts of others and have a pronounced case of "the blind leading the blind?" (Matt.15.14).

(iv) Sacrifice

The sacrifice constituted the heart of the atonement procedure. Sacrifice ("olah," in Hebrew) means "above." It is a picture of smoke rising up into the air, or going up toward heaven. The Greek rendering employs the word "holocaust," which pictures something burnt and its odour going up to the Lord. Therefore, the people of Israel well understood the purpose of a sacrifice -- it was the smell of the atonement price being communicated to the Lord, of which He would then accept that the sin had been paid for (though via a substitute).

(v) Perfection

In making a sacrifice, the animal had to be without defect or blemish (1.3), i.e., "perfect." We know, however, according to the writer of Hebrews, that the blood of bulls and goats could never do the job perfectly (Heb.10.4). Ultimately, only a man could pay the full atonement price for man -- and a perfect man was needed at that -- which is why Jesus had to be born a man in the incarnation and go to the cross as a perfectly sinless human being. Hence, even during this Levitical period, it was foreshadowed that Christ die so as to completely and finally pay for man's sin. Jesus, therefore, fully completed the ideal here in verse 3 of a "perfect" sacrifice for sin.

(vi) Transference

The one making an offering had to lay his hands on the head of the offering. In that way, a “transference” of sin took place from the person to the animal. The animal subsequently identified with those sins and bore those sins in its own body. It was subsequently slaughtered and its blood shed. The ransom price was paid, God appeased, and the sin expunged. In like manner our sins were transferred to, or laid upon, Jesus on the cross. He then bore our sins in His body, His blood was shed, he suffered death, the price was paid and God was appeased. The result? Our sin was expunged, and we are allowed to go scott-free. What a deal!

One can see that no other Book explains and enhances an understanding of the entire sacrificial system, and the sacrifice of Jesus, as does Leviticus!

(vii) Other terms

There are other terms employed in the New Testament that help further an understanding of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. These can be followed up in any New Testament studies, but briefly, they include:

- Justification (right standing with God). To be justified means that our standing in God is assured and secure. One is justified at the point of salvation. We are justified by faith (Ro.3.28, Gal.2.16);
- Sanctification (the process of being made holy). Unlike justification, sanctification is a life-long endeavour, and progressive, as we become more and more like Jesus. Our character becomes more like His holy character. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in conforming us to the image of Christ (Jn.17.19, 1Cor.6.11);
- Reconciliation (being restored in full fellowship with the Lord). To be reconciled means that there is no longer any offence between man and God. When we are saved, we are also reconciled to God. There is no longer the sin barrier between man and God (Ro.5.11, 2Cor.5.19);
- Adoption (right position with God). We are no longer slaves, but sons of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus has saved us, we are adopted into His family and Kingdom (Gal.4.7, Eph.1.5);
- Election (God first loved us and drew us near unto salvation). In God’s foreknowledge, He chose us before the foundation of the world for salvation. We did not choose Him, He chose us. We merely have the privilege of responding to His call and being responsible with that call (Ro.9.11, 2Pet.1.10).

Following this brief review of some of the terms of sacrifice and salvation in Leviticus, and even beyond into the New Testament, we are now in a better position to understand the various mechanics contained in the sacrificial offerings. Let us now return to the Burnt offering described in Lev.Ch.1.

The Burnt offering was a voluntary act of worship in which sinful man desired to restore his relationship with God. It was an atonement for unintentional sin, and was an expression of

man's dedication, commitment, and surrender to God. In a sense, the offering was a bit like a vow -- one didn't have to do it, but one could choose to make a Burnt offering in a show of appreciation and reverence for the Lord.

There were also other types of offerings, yet to be introduced, such as the Sin and Guilt offerings which were mandatory sacrifices for sin, and other involuntary offerings such as the Grain and Fellowship offerings. These will be briefly outlined below.

2. The Grain Offering (Ch.2)

The Hebrew word for this type of offering is "minchah," meaning, "a gift to the Lord." The offering was made of fine flour, with oil and incense put on it. These ingredients give a picture of worship and fellowship. They also speak of the beautiful combination of the Word (flour), the anointing (oil), and prayer or praise (incense), so often apparent in type throughout the Bible.

This offering could be in the form of simple fine flour (v.1), baked in an oven (v.4), or made in a pan [not Japan] (v.7). We will become increasingly aware in our study of Leviticus that the Lord provides both opportunity and scope for worship and fellowship to every individual, whatever their station, circumstance, or position in life.

The priest would only take a handful and burn it before the Lord. The remainder could be kept by the priests and eaten. It was significant that God should allow His representatives, the priests, to eat a portion of the offering. The gesture probably symbolized the kind of fellowship and relationship the Lord had with the priests. The Lord is profoundly relational, always desiring that we have sweet fellowship with Him!

Like the Burnt offering, the Grain offering was purely voluntary and not mandatory. It was given as an act of worship, in recognition of God's goodness and provision. Of the five offerings, it was the only bloodless one.

3. The Fellowship or Peace Offering (Ch.3)

Derived from the Hebrew word "shalom," meaning "peace," this Fellowship (or Peace) offering directly focuses on fellowship with the Lord. The person making the offering would bring an animal, lay hands on it, and slaughter it. However, for this offering, the only part burned was the fat. The blood was sprinkled on the altar. An animal could be chosen from the herd (v.1), from the flock (v.6), or it could even be a goat (v.12).

The Hebrew word for "fat" is the same word used for "oil" or "anointing." The fat always had to be removed from the sacrifices as it belonged to the Lord. Both fat (typifying the anointing) and blood (typifying life) are from the Lord and belong to the Lord: "All fat is the Lord's...You shall not eat any fat or any blood" (v's.16-17). No man or priest could take these holy emblems for himself. It remains an excellent reminder to us today that the anointing we have, and the covering for sin that we receive, is all of God. We cannot boast about how we got it for ourselves through our ingenuity or hard work.

The entire scene is a picture of fellowship, peace with God, communion, and dedication to the Lord. Like the Burnt and Grain offerings, the Fellowship/Peace offering was purely

voluntary, and given as an act of worship. There were five offerings overall, though it is the remaining sin and guilt offerings that were mandatory.

4. The Sin Offering (4.1-5.13)

Sin (“Chatah” in Hebrew) means “trespass, penalty of sin, or missing the mark.” This was an offering for sin committed unintentionally, for hidden sin, or for sins committed in ignorance (Heb.9.7). In essence, it was for those who sinned unintentionally “in any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done, and commits any of them” (4.2,13,22,27).

An “unintentional” sin, unlike the way it sounds in modern English, was not a sin committed in which the individual had no intention of doing. True “intent” or premeditation may have indeed occurred. Essentially, the unintentional sin was a sin that could be atoned for, a sin that would not incur instant capital punishment (unlike the “wilful” or “intentional” sin that reaped instant judgment). More on this later. Basically, the offering deals with the sin nature in man.

Once someone became aware of an unintentional sin, a hidden sin (a revelation of a formerly unknown sin), or a sin committed in ignorance (in which an individual genuinely did not know a certain action was sinful), he could make a Sin offering. He would confess his sins over the animal and lay his hands on it. Symbolically, a transfer was taking place as the sin was put on the innocent animal and its blood shed on the behalf of the one making the offering (many of the details of this process were elaborated earlier).

After the animal was sacrificed and burnt (again, after first removing the mandatory blood and fat), the ashes were taken outside of the camp. This was because the animal had sin transferred to it and rendered the ashes unclean. It speaks of the defiling nature of sin, of which people must be separated from and removed from.

This offering was available to five different types of people, depending on their position in Israel: the high priest or congregation of Israel (who had to offer a young bull); a leader (a male goat); a common person (a female goat or lamb); a poor person (a dove or pigeon); and a very poor person (fine flour). Hence, the Lord made provision for every person, whatever their status or station in life. In God’s abundant provision and grace, nobody would be excluded from restoring one’s broken fellowship with God.

In short, the Sin offering was a mandatory atonement for specific unintentional sins. The offering covered the sin nature by making atonement for the sinner.

5. The Guilt Offering (5.14-6.7)

The final offering is the Guilt offering, which was closely related in purpose and process to the Sin offering. The Guilt offering made atonement for sinning unintentionally against God’s holy things. It was even more specific in nature than the Sin offering as it did not just deal with the sin nature. The Guilt offering summarized specific sins as either defrauding God (5.14-19) or defrauding other people (6.1-7).

In the case of sinning against God’s holy things or against one’s neighbour, a ram or lamb had to be offered, as well as restoring that which was sinned against plus 1/5 (20%) of the

whole. The Sin offering covered cases where no restitution was possible, whereas the Guilt offering covered cases where restitution was possible, e.g., restoring stolen property. So, this offering was mandatory for unintentional sin requiring restitution.

The Sequence of the five Offerings, and the Meaning of “Unintentional Sin”

The sequence of these five sacrifices, as per Ch.9, was typically as follows:

- Sin and Guilt/Trespass offering (mandatory, and dealing with the covering for sin. Five choices were available here for the Sin offering, as mentioned above, and a ram or lamb could be offered for the Guilt offering. To the Christian today, the Sin offering speaks of redemption for the sinner that he is, and the Guilt offering speaks of redemption for the sin he commits. These two offerings were the only offerings that were compulsory);
- Burnt offering (a voluntary act of worship, taking a further step, a special act of devotion, commitment, or showing complete surrender to God. A bull, ram or male bird could be offered. To the Christian today, the Burnt offering speaks of consecration);
- Fellowship/Peace offering (a voluntary act of worship and thanksgiving, and is an expression of someone wanting fellowship with the Lord. Any animal without defect from the flock or the herd could be used here. To the Christian today, the Fellowship offering speaks of fellowship);
- Grain offering (a voluntary act of worship in further recognition of God’s goodness and provision. No animal sacrifice was involved here. It could include grain, fine flour, olive oil, incense, baked bread and salt. This offering sometimes accompanied the Burnt or Fellowship offering. To the Christian today, the Grain offering speaks of service).

Let us return again to the question of what “unintentional” sins are, since that is the type of sin continually being mentioned in the five offerings, and (along with hidden sins or sins of ignorance) the only type of sin that could be atoned for in the Old Testament. We see references, for instance, to unintentional sins in Lev.4.2, 22, 27, 5.15, 18, and so on.

At first sight, “unintentional” sins appear to mean any sin not intended, premeditated, or planned in advance. But this is clearly not the case because there are many so-called “intentional” or premeditated sins listed in the Old Testament that were able to be atoned for. For instance, we should note Lev.6.1-5. These are clearly cases of deliberate, planned, known, and intended sin. Here, we witness a premeditated case of deception and stealing from a companion (6.2), and the sinner even adding to his fault by lying about his theft and declaring his innocence (6.3). These sins are about as “intentional” or premeditated as they come.

The importance of sorting this all out becomes apparent when we realize that there was no atonement for intentional or wilful sin! Even in the New Testament Paul, in speaking of the Great Day of Atonement, reiterates that the high priest made offerings only for sins of ignorance (or unintentional sins) of the people (Heb.9.7).

More light can be shed on the meaning of unintentional sins by examining its complete opposite -- intentional or wilful sins. The narrative of the blasphemer in Lev.24.10-16 tells us part of the answer, for this was a clear case of intentional sin for which there was no atonement,

and death was the result. The basic issue is blasphemy against the Lord. The Hebrew word for “blasphemy” here is “Naqab,” which means “to pierce or bore a hole through so as to diminish the value of.” In a few words, the blasphemer was one who diminished or despised the value of God. Now we begin to get a glimpse into intentional sin, as it obviously offended the Lord deeply and tended to diminish His value.

Numbers 15.27-31 says much the same. This speaks of making a sacrifice if a person sins “unintentionally.” Here, the priest could make atonement for and the person forgiven (v’s.27-29). However, note verses 30 and 31 of Numbers Ch.15: “But the person who does anything defiantly...that person is blaspheming the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from his people.” The words, “blasphemy,” “defiantly,” and “despised,” ring a familiar sound with Lev.Ch.24. Furthermore, note that the word “defiantly” in this Nu.15 passage means “with a lifted up fist” (“Begad” in Heb.). This throws even more light on what “blasphemy” is, for now we get a more complete picture of it as a wilful, lifted up fist of defiance and mockery in the face of God. No wonder there was no atonement for this gross sin!

Further New Testament light is provided in Heb.10.26-29, which says: “For if we go on sinning wilfully [intentionally] after receiving the knowledge of truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” The word “wilfully” (“Ekoosios” in Gk.) in this passage means, “a willing and deliberate rejection of God.” Hence, it appears that there is no atonement for intentional or wilful sin even in the New Testament. In short, we are getting an overall picture that intentional sin has a lot to do with defying God, despising God, diminishing the value of God, lifting a defiant fist against God, and deliberately rejecting God. This is the blasphemy. And this is the intentional sin.

Fortunately, at least for us now in the New Testament dispensation, blasphemy or intentional sin is not a once and for all sin. We live under a New Covenant in which we have many opportunities during our lifetime to restore a rebellious and blasphemous condition. Hebrews 6.4-6 assists on this point. Verse 6 says, “...and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.” The circumstantial participle “since they again crucify” in the Greek actually means “while crucifying.” In other words, truly blasphemous people are living in an ongoing state of rejecting, defying, crucifying and mocking God. So, “blasphemy” or “intentional/wilful” sin for us today under the New Testament dispensation consists of an ongoing, unrepentant and rebellious state, and not a once only expression of defiance (God help us all if this were the case). The solution to this terrible state in the New Testament is also clear -- repentance! Notice that the repentant woman caught in adultery, and brought to Jesus in John Ch.8, was allowed to go free.

The consequence for “blasphemy” or “intentional/wilful” sin in the Old Testament, on the other hand, was usually instant judgment by stoning. For instance, the following “intentional” offences were punished by stoning:

- worshipping other gods (Deut.17.2-7);
- enticing others to worship other gods (Deut.13.6-11);