

An Introduction to Leviticus

Leviticus is probably the book in the bible that people have the most difficulty in connecting to. In terms of temporal setting, it follows on directly from the book of Exodus, so the Israelites are still camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, having received God's instructions through Moses. However, there is less in the way of conventional narrative in Leviticus, which makes it hard for readers today to digest.

Leviticus reads to us now as a set of rules, most of which have little or no practical applications as far as our worship of God today goes. It is often divided into two halves and it is principally concerned with purity. The first 16 chapters deal more generally with the subject and include the ordination rites of the priesthood and then, from chapter 17 onwards, the instructions apply more specifically to the priestly duties. This part of the book is commonly described as The Holiness Code.

Who?

So who wrote Leviticus and why? When we mentioned the documentary hypothesis in connection with Genesis, we saw that one of the proposed sources for the first five books of the Bible is described as the P source. The P stands for Priestly and Leviticus is thought to come almost entirely from this source. Even though the documentary hypothesis no longer holds universal appeal, it is still quite helpful to think of Leviticus as coming from the priestly tradition, since it deals with the sacrificial worship of Israel and the central role of the priests in that worship.

When?

The P source is usually dated to the period of Israel's exile in Babylon, the middle of the sixth century BC. This means, that like the other books of the Pentateuch, Leviticus is looking back to the time in Israel's history when the people had control over their own destinies and their own religious worship.

For me, much of the teaching in the Hebrew Scriptures comes from looking backwards. The books of the bible were often written during times of hardship or struggle, when the people were asking themselves what hope they could have for the future. Invariably, the answer to this question comes from looking into the past and to the things that God has done throughout their history.

If we compare Leviticus to the vision of the Temple in Ezekiel, chapters 40 onwards, we see much of the same sort of material regarding sacrifices and priestly vestments. However, Ezekiel's vision is of a future Temple and declares a hope in the future of Israel's sacrificial worship. My guess is that Leviticus is doing the same. It says, we may not be able to worship as we would like now, in Babylon, but we can reflect back via an idealised account of the old sacrificial system.

Why?

It has been suggested that Leviticus is a sort of handbook for priests, detailing the minutiae of the sacrificial system and rules regarding ritual purity. However, my feeling is that, although there is a lack of traditional narrative writing in the book, it stills contains more than is necessary for a volume like a handbook. Look at the examples it gives of 'When a man does this, then here is the response ...' One can see that these instructions seem to stem from real-life occurrences. As readers, can we reconstruct the stories behind these legal rulings? Can it be helpful to do so?

I think if we look behind the text of Leviticus into the stories that inspired the laws, we see humanity behaving as humanity behaves. From this we can begin to see the morality that God is calling us to rather than just the legal framework Leviticus appear to present. Also, as Christians, Leviticus gives a glimpse of the sacrificial system that the sacrifice of Jesus came to replace. It shows us our beginnings and makes sense of the apparent brutality of the cross. As, like the author of Leviticus, we look backwards, at the scapegoat in chapter 16 for example, we see the future hope that is Jesus.