

BOOK OF LEVITICUS

Time period: formation of Israel as a nation called out by God

Author: Moses exclusively (Right); Moses, Joshua, and later editors (conservative-moderate); compiled traditions and mythologies (Left)

Location of author: wilderness journey after the Exodus (Right, conservative-moderate); Babylon and/or Land of Israel (Left)

Target audience and their location: people of Israel wandering in the desert (Right, conservative-moderate); Jewish exiles returning from Babylon (Left)

People:

Moses, Aaron, the priests, Nadab, Abihu, Mishael, Elzaphan, Uzziel, Eleazar, Ithamar, Shelomith, Dibri (Danite)

Places:

Tent of Meeting, Mount Sinai, Desert of Sinai

Places mentioned:

Egypt, Canaan

Key Themes and Events:

Moses is given the instructions of: the burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering / the priests are allowed to eat of the grain offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering / meat of the fellowship offering must be eaten on the day it is offered / Aaron and his sons are formally ordained priests of Israel / Nadab and Abihu are killed for offering strange fire before the Lord / Moses is given instructions regarding clean and unclean meats, the purification of a woman after childbirth, regulations about infectious skin diseases and how one is to be cleansed, uncleanness regarding seminal emission / the solemn Day of Atonement is established / it is prohibited for any person to consume blood / specific prohibitions regarding inappropriate sex are given, mandating that the Israelites not follow the practices of Egypt or Canaan / Moses is given: various laws defining Israel as different, punishments for specific crimes / specific rules defining the priesthood, what composes an unacceptable sacrifice / the appointed times of Israel are listed in the order they are to be remembered / a blasphemer is stoned to death / the Sabbath and jubilee years are to be remembered / Israel will prosper in the Promised Land if it is obedient to the Lord / laws regarding redemption of property are detailed

Key Scriptures: Leviticus 7:33-36; 10:1-3, 8-10; 11:44-45; 16:29-31; 17:10-12; 18:1-5, 21; 19:2; 20:7, 22-24; 23:1-2; 26:6-13; 27:34 / **Worshipping a Holy God** (1:1-17:16); **Living a holy life** (18:1-27:34)

Theological Summary: The third book of the Torah bears the Hebrew name *Vayikra* (וַיִּקְרָא), meaning “and He called,” derived from its first verse, “Then the LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting.” Our English term Leviticus is derived from its Greek Septuagint title, *Leuitikon* (ΛΕΥΙΤΙΚΟΝ), which means “pertaining to the Levites.” This carried over into the Latin Vulgate as *Liber Leviticus*. Some Jewish traditions, notably in the Mishnah,¹ refer to this text as *torat kohanim* (תּוֹרַת כֹּהֲנִים), “the instruction of the priests,” or various derivatives.² The service of the priests in the life of Israel is undeniably a major feature of this book.³

The Book of Leviticus functions as part of a long narrative beginning in Exodus 25 with the giving of the Tabernacle instructions. Leviticus continues these instructions, with the only discontinuity occurring when laws regulating Israel proper are given.⁴ As Leviticus begins, we see that the Tabernacle has been manufactured, and now Israel needs to know how to function with it present, becoming a special nation unto God.⁵ The instruction contained in Leviticus makes up almost a third of the Torah, and spans about a year of the Israelites’ sojourn. Many commentators think that the giving of many of the commandments in Leviticus is interwoven with the proclamation of the Decalogue on Mount Sinai (Exodus chs. 19-20), and probably also the covenant ceremony (Exodus chs. 21-24).

The textual themes of Leviticus often concern the special duties of the Levites, as well as the service of worship at the Tabernacle (later to be applied to the Jerusalem Temple). It is absolutely accurate to conclude, “Leviticus consists almost entirely of law and ritual” (Levine, *ABD*).⁶ However, even though the important role of the priests is detailed in Leviticus, this book is not solely concerned with priests. Leviticus ultimately concerns all of the people of Israel.⁷

In the Jewish theological tradition, Leviticus sits at the center and “heart” of the Torah. It is often used early to introduce Jewish children to the commandments of the Torah, so they can learn to be viable members of the religious community. Leviticus is fairly straightforward, and it is not difficult to inculcate its principles into one’s psyche. As Allis notes, “Leviticus is in no sense an esoteric book. The people were entitled and expected to know exactly what was required of them, and of their priests, in that service of the sanctuary which so deeply concerned every Israelite” (Allis, *NBCR*).⁸

¹ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 589.

² Baruch J. Schwartz, “Leviticus,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 203.

³ Baruch A. Levine, “Leviticus, Book of,” in *ABD*, 4:312.

⁴ R.K. Harrison, “Leviticus,” in *NIDB*, 593.

⁵ R. Laird Harris, “Leviticus,” in *EXP*, 2:501.

⁶ Levine, “Leviticus, Book of,” in *ABD*, 4:312.

⁷ G.J. Wenham, “Leviticus,” in *ISBE*, 3:111; John H. Hayes, “Leviticus,” in *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 145.

⁸ Oswald T. Allis, “Leviticus,” in *NBCR*, 140.

Christian handling of Leviticus is often vastly different than compared to that of Judaism. Christian exegetes often have a very difficult time understanding the holiness code contained in Leviticus. Among theologians and teachers who examine Leviticus, there is often a great deal of allegorizing of the text.⁹ Many only prefer to look at the Messianic symbolism of Leviticus, solely interpreting it in light of the “Christ event.” There is significant difficulty in reading Leviticus because it contains a great deal of commandments that many believe are no longer valid,¹⁰ but Jewish New Testament studies are revealing more and more that Yeshua and the Apostles not only observed these things in the First Century, but upheld their validity as a standard to be continued. Commandments of considerable difficulty for Christians to understand are those of clean/unclean and pure/impure. They are often regarded as being archaic, not as simple elements of the obedience that God requires of His people.¹¹ In defense of Christian exegesis and commentary on Leviticus, though, many have made valid comparisons between the service of the priests and the service of ministers and pastors in local churches today.¹²

The Book of Leviticus deals with several kinds of regulations: worship, ceremonial cleanness, various moral laws, God’s appointed times, the Sabbatical year, and the year of Jubilee. Most of these commandments were delivered by God to Moses during the year that Ancient Israel encamped at Mount Sinai. How many were actually given while Moses was on the mountain, versus when he was in the Tent of Meeting, cannot be fully known.

The key theme of the Book of Leviticus is undeniably the holiness of God and how He wants His people to be separated out. He says, “I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy” (11:45), a theme repeated throughout not only the Tanach, but also the Apostolic Scriptures. Leviticus may be divided into five principal sections: the sacrificial system (chs. 1-7), the inaugural service of the sanctuary (chs. 8-10), the laws of impurities (chs. 11-16), the holiness code (chs. 17-26), and the commutation of gifts of the sanctuary (ch. 27).¹³

We see in these subdivisions that God wants His people to be transferred into the realm of being clean and sacred. Leviticus requires perfect animals to be sacrificed (chs. 1-7), and that only priests without physical deformity can serve (chs. 8-10). Signs of physical blemish are listed, including: a woman’s discharge after birth (ch. 12); sores, burns, or certain types of baldness (chs. 13-14); a man’s seminal discharge (15:1-18). Jewish and Christian commentators today are not fully agreed as to whether such signs signify ritual impurity and/or spiritual impurity. However, before one can reenter the camp of Israel, certain types of sacrifice may need to be offered.

With Leviticus, we see that God begins to establish His theocracy through the people of Israel. Notable sacrifices among those categorized would include those for the Day of Atonement (ch. 16), a day of national mourning and repentance. Between the commandments given in Leviticus sit two major narratives: the death of Nadab and Abihu (10:12-19), and God

⁹ Dillard and Longman, 73.

¹⁰ Harris, in *EXP*, 2:513-514.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2:524-530.

¹² Wenham, “Leviticus,” in *ISBE*, 3:111.

¹³ J. Milgrom, “Leviticus,” in *IDBSup*, pp 541-545.

imparting Israel the eye-for-eye principle (24:17-22). Interestingly, when considering these, and other points in Leviticus, some liberal commentators have considered the commandments in Leviticus to demonstrate some key salvation principles:

“Hebrew law is *Heilsgesetz*, ‘sacred and saving law.’ *Heilsgesetz* in the OT not only records and is the revelation of a divine order of society but also seeks to establish such a society in the commonwealth of Israel. The character and function of Leviticus then is summed up in this idea of *Heilsgesetz*” (*IDB*).¹⁴

Apparently, a critical part of God’s salvation demonstrated toward human beings is understanding His sacredness. Any reading of Leviticus cannot fail to consider this.

The authorship of Leviticus, as with all books of the Pentateuch, is a debated issue among conservative and liberal theologians. Ancient tradition, both Jewish and Christian, ascribes authorship of Leviticus to Moses.¹⁵ It is notable that almost every chapter of the text includes the phrase “The LORD spoke to Moses,”¹⁶ pointing to some kind of Mosaic involvement.

Conservative theologians today will generally accept principal Mosaic involvement in the composition of Leviticus, especially as “These are the commandments which the LORD commanded Moses for the sons of Israel at Mount Sinai” (27:34). Specific commandments are given by God to Moses in Leviticus (i.e., 1:1; 4:1; 6:1), a fact confirmed in the Apostolic Scriptures (Romans 10:5). Most conservatives will, however, concede that Moses probably did not compose Leviticus in its final form, and will allow for some pre- and/or post-exilic redaction of the text. Harrison notes that “Egyptian material...was revised from time to time by various generations of scribes,”¹⁷ and it is possible that the Ancient Israelites may have employed similar techniques. What is perhaps more significant for us to consider, as Wenham indicates, is that “Leviticus claims throughout to record what God revealed to Moses; nowhere does it ever state that Moses wrote down what he heard” (*ISBE*).¹⁸ Many Messianics would argue for exclusive Mosaic authorship of Leviticus, including his penning it with his own hand. They would have difficulty with the view that Moses may have given the information God relayed to him to scribes, or someone in his inner circle, to then write down. But even if Moses did not actually write down Leviticus with his own hand, he is still ultimately its human author.

In favor of its antiquity, conservatives point out that the strong theological assertion present in Leviticus is that it prepares Israel for living in the Promised Land. Arguments that are commonly made in favor of Leviticus being originally written around the time of the Exodus often stem from comparison with other literature in the Ancient Near East.¹⁹ The law code present in Leviticus is not unique to the Second Millennium B.C.E.,²⁰ and the establishment of the covenant between Israel and its God was consistent with other

¹⁴ G. Henton Davies, “Leviticus,” in *IDB*, 3:120.

¹⁵ Harrison, “Leviticus,” in *NIDB*, 593.

¹⁶ Allis, in *NBCR*, 140; Wenham, “Leviticus,” in *ISBE*, 3:111.

¹⁷ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 592.

¹⁸ Wenham, “Leviticus,” in *ISBE*, 3:112.

¹⁹ Harris, in *EXP*, 2:503-504.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:515-516.

agreements made in the Second Millennium B.C.E. as well.²¹ Harris asserts, “God used Moses’ extensive legal background and knowledge of the common law of the East, and thus some of the laws are of the familiar case-type law” (*EXP*).²² What makes Leviticus unique when compared to the other law codes of the Ancient Near East is how Israel’s God is so concerned for His people, rather than Israel being God’s “slaves.” The priestly nature of the text confirms this, incorporating the reality that they would be responsible for training the people, which itself is “a tradition that was established by the Sumerians....[and] the same can be said for ancient Egypt” (Harrison).²³

Liberal theologians, in stark contrast to the conservative view of dating Leviticus back to the Second Millennium B.C.E, commonly ascribe authorship to P or the so-called Priestly writer (see **Genesis** entry for a summarization of the JEDP documentary hypothesis), often ignoring any conservative opinion.²⁴ Some apply P authorship to just chs. 1-16, and the holiness code of chs. 17-26 to a theoretical H.²⁵ Liberals assume a very late date for Leviticus’ composition, usually 500-450 B.C.E. after the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon, and often describe the material as “Josaianic,”²⁶ with much having originated during the reign of King Josiah. They will often argue that the P material is difficult to reconcile with other material in the Torah,²⁷ and critics of the JEDP hypothesis will sometimes claim that the so-called P source comes from an “Hegelian evolutionary philosophy” (Harrison, *NIDB*)²⁸ of thesis-antithesis-synthesis.

Liberal scholars will often claim that the complexities of Leviticus cannot be present in a document that dates from between 1500-1300 B.C.E., but this is challenged by many conservatives who argue that there were more complicated religious systems in place before this time. “Elaborate rituals and sacrificial systems are attested in the Ancient Near East long before the time of Moses. The normal critical view that these institutions are a late feature of Israelite religion is contrary to what is known about the religious practices in neighboring contemporary culture” (Wenham, *ISBE*).²⁹ Further critiques of the liberal hypothesis of dating Leviticus rather late is that no situation would have presented itself in Babylon requiring the separation of clean and unclean animals,³⁰ requiring this code to have previously existed, and also the fact that leprosy was widely known as a disease as far back as the Third Millennium B.C.E.,³¹ likewise requiring some kind of pre-exilic regulation.

In recent days, the common liberal view of Leviticus has been changing in certain schools. The unity of the text in relationship to the entire Torah is being acknowledged. “Rhetorically, the material...is presented as the direct ‘word of God’ and thus makes a claim to

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2:517-518.

²² *Ibid.*, 2:519.

²³ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 591.

²⁴ Davies, “Leviticus,” in *IDB*, 3:117-118; Levine, “Leviticus, Book of,” in *ABD*, 4:319-320.

²⁵ Davies, “Leviticus,” in *IDB*, 3:119-120.

²⁶ Dillard and Longman, 74.

²⁷ Schwartz, “Leviticus,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 205.

²⁸ Harrison, “Leviticus,” in *NIDB*, 593.

²⁹ Wenham, “Leviticus,” in *ISBE*, 3:112.

³⁰ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 594.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp 594-595.

absolute and unchallengeable authority” (Dozeman, *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*).³² While P is sometimes described as “least difficult” (*IDB*)³³ of the Pentateuchal sources that liberals identify, liberal Jewish scholars are challenging its rather late dating, and are beginning to argue for a much earlier dating of P, leading just a few to consider some kind of Mosaic involvement, or at least considering a significant part of it pre-exilic.³⁴ Furthermore, literary examinations of the Torah are causing many to seriously question the JEDP hypothesis, and Leviticus is no exception.³⁵ Ironically, classical liberals often admit “Jesus canonized Leviticus once for all” (*IDB*),³⁶ especially with the Messiah’s emphasis on God’s love.

Few divergences exist among extant editions of the Hebrew Masoretic Text of Leviticus.³⁷ Fragments of Leviticus in paleo-Hebrew or Phoenician script were discovered at Qumran, even though they are often dated from the Second-First Centuries B.C.E.³⁸ Both the Samaritan Pentateuch and Greek Septuagint editions of Leviticus reflect various interpretative traditions in their renderings, allowing some theologians to conclude that the Hebrew source text behind these versions was older than today’s extant MT.³⁹ It is notable that the LXX includes some distinct Pharisaical interpretations of commandments. The Apostles’ usage of the LXX in their writings should make some of these *halachic* judgments authoritative for Messianics today, which often parallel the customs of mainline Judaism today, and not some of the small sectarian movements of the First Century.

In evangelical Christian theology, teachings on Leviticus often include the critical need to know about the New Testament emphases on loving one’s neighbor (19:18; cf. Matthew 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:24; James 2:8). In an historical sense, evangelicals will often emphasize how one needs to understand the laws and customs found in Leviticus that Yeshua observed as a Jew living on Earth. Coupled with this is the fact that we need to understand the Levitical priesthood, and its relationship to Yeshua’s priesthood described in Hebrews.⁴⁰ The Tabernacle system is, to a degree, internalized in Believers’ hearts (2 Corinthians 6:16).⁴¹ Evangelicals are right to emphasize the fact that when compared to ancient religions, a strong thrust of Leviticus’ message is on seeing one’s relationship to God restored.⁴² The concern of God for the well-being of His people is thoroughly demonstrated in the detail of Leviticus.⁴³

A great deal of Leviticus cannot be kept today without an operating Tabernacle or Temple, and Messianic Believers who often argue in favor of the continuance of *all* of the

³² Dozeman, in *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 146; cf. Milgrom, “Leviticus,” in *IDBSup*, 541; Dillard and Longman, 76.

³³ Davies, “Leviticus,” in *IDB*, 3:117.

³⁴ Wenham, “Leviticus,” in *ISBE*, 3:113.

³⁵ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 598.

³⁶ Davies, “Leviticus,” in *IDB*, 3:122.

³⁷ Milgrom, “Leviticus,” in *IDBSup*, 541.

³⁸ Levine, “Leviticus, Book of,” in *ABD*, 4:318.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Wenham, “Leviticus,” in *ISBE*, 3:115; Dillard and Longman, pp 81-82.

⁴¹ Cf. Allis, in *NBCR*, pp 141-412; Wenham, “Leviticus,” in *ISBE*, 3:113.

⁴² Wenham, “Leviticus,” in *ISBE*, 3:115.

⁴³ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 603-612.

Torah usually fail to recognize that the work of Yeshua has set aside the Levitical sacrificial system (Hebrews 7:18) until the Millennium (Ezekiel chs. 40-44). This position, however, is not adhered to by most, who will instead often highlight *only* the parts of Leviticus that can be observed in the modern world, such as the kosher dietary laws or the appointed times. It should be noted, however, that while there is a broad consensus that the seventh-day Sabbath, appointed times, and dietary regulations should still be followed, there are diverse opinions and views about how these things should be followed. Some sectors of the Messianic movement lack a consideration for the style of *halachah* as demonstrated by Yeshua and the Apostles in First Century Judaism, instead preferring to reconstruct how they believe various commandments should be followed from the text, without considering any other Biblical tradition. However, more and more Messianics who study Leviticus every year are making profound connections to how its commandments are applied in the Apostolic Scriptures.

The holiness of God that He requires of His people is something that must be emphasized in today's generation—and it is seen all throughout Leviticus. Many will simply label the last third of Leviticus (17:1-25:55) as the “holiness code,” with God emphasizing the blessings and consequences of obedience and disobedience, but holiness is certainly much more than just “do’s and don’ts.” God desires His people to be holy just like He is, and be separated out from the ways of the world. Many holiness movements in the past several centuries have used verses from Leviticus that focus on ethics and morality, such as the German Piety movement and Wesleyan movement of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, respectively. These movements, however, often did not understand Leviticus in its totality for Believers as is emphasized in much of today's emerging Messianic movement.

With this in mind, the Messianic community today needs to understand that it has been endowed with a sacred trust from the Lord to convey the fullness of His holiness, demonstrated by not only commandments dealing with morality, but also how we conduct ourselves outwardly as His people. We are often quick to judge our Christian brethren for their lack of following many of Leviticus' outward commandments, in spite of the fact that many sincere Christians remain true to God's ethical commandments. As Wenham summarizes, “It seems fair to say that the NT only accepts the moral law of the OT but reiterates [its] basic theology” (*ISBE*).⁴⁴ Harris further remarks, “we can learn principles of atonement, prayer, faith, and grace from Israel's ceremonies of justice in business, honor in home, truth in speech, and so forth, from Israel's civil legislation” (*EXP*).⁴⁵ Building on foundations such as these, with Yeshua as the focus, should make it easier to emphasize other points seen in Leviticus such as Sabbath or kosher observance.

There are some notable weaknesses in the Messianic community concerning Leviticus, specifically with a lack of engagement with current conservative scholarship concerning its antiquity. Too much attention has probably been given to ultra Orthodox and/or Chassidic Jewish commentaries on Leviticus, at the expense of examining its historical setting. Another valid critique that could be given is that some Messianics base their interpretations of Torah commandments solely on what is seen in Leviticus, and they are not reconciled with their

⁴⁴ Wenham, “Leviticus,” in *ISBE*, 3:117.

⁴⁵ Harris, in *EXP*, 2:519.

counterparts in Deuteronomy, which may add further details, to say nothing how they are applied elsewhere in the Bible. Furthermore, a lack of understanding some of Leviticus' regulations in light of the Ancient Near East can lead to some misinterpretation with how they are applied in the Apostolic Scriptures.

Of all of the issues that we need to consider when reading Leviticus is the need for us to truly understand that this text is *Heilsgesetz*, or "sacred and saving law." We need to understand how to focus on the missional aspects of Leviticus and how the Lord is concerned with the well-being of His people. We need to emphasize that God wants to have communion with His people, and be restored to them—themes ultimately embodied in His Son, Yeshua the Messiah.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON LEVITICUS:

- 1. What is the central focus of the Book of Leviticus? Why do you think many people have difficulty understanding it?**
- 2. What is the significance of the animal sacrifices when set against an Ancient Near Eastern backdrop? How do the animal sacrifices relate to our present condition with Yeshua as Messiah and Redeemer?**
- 3. Why do you think Nadab and Abihu were killed?**
- 4. What are the dietary laws to teach God's people?**
- 5. What is the significance of the Day of Atonement?**

6. Which of the miscellaneous laws of Leviticus interests you the most? Which requires further clarification?

7. Which of the festivals in Leviticus 23 interests you the most? Which requires further clarification?

8. What does God say will happen to the Israelites if they obey Him? disobey Him?

9. What important lessons might today's Messianic community learn by listening to the message of Leviticus?

REFLECTION ON LEVITICUS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Leviticus: