

Introducing Leviticus

Getting our Bearings in Leviticus

Each year, I ask my students to tell me what adjective they would use to describe Leviticus. After a brief pause, presumably to work out how honest an answer I am looking for, the inevitable response spills out: ‘Boring!’ From there, the proverbial floodgates open. When the dust settles, someone will usually put up their hand and ask me about my answer to the question. It is always the same: ‘underappreciated’.

With Leviticus we come to what is, for many Christian people, one of the most unfamiliar parts of the Bible. Beyond the famous command to ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ (19:18), and perhaps the currently infamous ‘Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman’ (18:22), the book remains a mystery. Many seem happy to leave that mystery unsolved, which is a great pity, for Leviticus is not just theologically rich, it is essential for grasping the full-orbed message of the gospel.

Literary setting

The importance of Leviticus becomes clearer when we consider its wider literary setting. While the books of the Torah (the Jewish name for the first five books of the Bible) or Pentateuch (i.e. ‘five books’) come to us as distinct units – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – they are best approached as connected rather than unconnected works. So, while each book can be fruitfully read on its own, its full force is only appreciated when read as part of the collection.

The Pentateuch as story

The connectedness of these five books should not be surprising. There is a narrative storyline that runs from Genesis through Deuteronomy. Sometimes, that storyline is front and center as, for example, in the ancestral narratives of Genesis 12–50. In other places, the storyline recedes to the background but is still evident in the narrator’s voice and the sequence of events. The Torah has been arranged as a single overarching story, albeit containing lots of inserted material: genealogies, poems, lists of instructions, and so on.

Realizing that the Pentateuch is shaped as a story has important implications when it comes to reading it. First, the material cannot simply be rearranged. One cannot simply collect all the narratives together or itemize the regulations in a neatly arranged appendix without doing violence to the text. The instruction contained in this part of Scripture works precisely in its *blend* of story and law (however much some readers might wish things had been done differently).

Second, as with any story, sequential order is important. Think of how a novel works. Of course, one can simply skip to the end to see how everything turns out, but much

would be lost by missing the development of characters, the artful weaving of material, the shocking twists in the plot, and so on. Doing so would also ignore any use of flashback and flash-forward, both of which are significant when reading the Pentateuch. You really do miss something if, for instance, you don't realize that the blessing God pronounces to Noah in Genesis 9 reverberates both with what He had said to humans in Genesis 1 and with what Israel hears in Leviticus 26. Following the order of the story is important.

Third, stories have purpose. There is a reason for telling them (with good stories at least!). It might be to make an excuse, or to give an account of how work went, but we tell stories to achieve certain ends. The same holds true for biblical stories. Recognizing this raises important questions that we need to ponder: What is the purpose of the Pentateuch? Why is this story being told, in this way? And what role does Leviticus play in it?

The purpose of the Pentateuch

Even for casual readers, the shift of focus in the Pentateuch's story at Genesis 12 is obvious. Genesis 1–11, with all the tricky questions it raises, merely sets the scene for the main topic: the emergence of Israel. From Abra(ha)m through to the plains of Moab, the author's primary interest lies in charting the relationship between this fledgling nation and its God. Yet even modern histories attempt more than simply listing a sequence of events. This was even more so the case in the ancient world where the primary purpose of history writing was exhortation. Events were described in order to teach readers something, or to confront them, or to commend (and thus implicitly command) a particular

virtue. Likewise, the Pentateuch does more than simply recount the past for the past's sake. As it informs readers about former people and events, the Torah critiques, questions, and judges in relation to that past. For example, Abraham's faith regarding what God had told him (e.g. Gen. 15:6) is not just a description of a long-distant past; it also asks readers, *Do you have the same trust in God's promises?*

In this way, the Pentateuch's story aims to persuade as it unfolds. Old Testament scholar, Terence Fretheim, nicely sums up the goal of that persuasion:

It is now more evident that the Pentateuch as a whole is fashioned to shape the faith and life of its readers [T]he most basic effect desired for readers is not that they become better theologians or better informed about their history and traditions. The end desired is more deeply religious, namely, that the relationship with God become what God intended in the creation.¹

The Pentateuch has been written with purpose. First and foremost, it tells readers about past people and events. Yet, because the account also records God's interactions with people, the story reveals His nature and character. In turn, this emerging picture of God helps readers evaluate the kinds of things He finds pleasing and those He does not. In this way, the story pronounces a verdict on readers' lives. They are invited to conform to God's ways rather than resist them. So, the Torah seeks to shape and transform the community of God's people, or even to call such a community into being where none exists. The Pentateuch, therefore, becomes a means of addressing a

1. Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 62.

broken divine-human relationship and restoring God's creation purposes.

Within these overarching goals, what role does Leviticus play?

The role of Leviticus in the Pentateuch's story

A key issue for understanding any story is to discern the point of tension, the problem that propels the narrative forward. There is usually an issue that the storyteller is trying to resolve (think about the last movie you watched). It is the journey towards resolution that gives direction to the story. That is why there is a feeling of relief and satisfaction when the problem is overcome (or why we complain if this aspect of the story is missing). Accordingly, identifying the point of tension is crucial for understanding any story. What tension is the Pentateuch seeking to resolve?

Eric Zenger has proposed the following overview of the Pentateuch's storyline.²

Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus	Numbers	Deuteronomy
Creation, fall, and the promise of a land	From Egypt, through the wilderness, to Sinai	At Sinai	From Sinai, through the wilderness, towards Moab	Instructions for life in the Promised Land

Zenger's scheme is geographical. There is a movement from the promise of a land (Genesis) through the wilderness (Exodus) to Mount Sinai (Leviticus). From there, the story progresses back through the wilderness (Numbers)

2. Erich Zenger, ed., *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (7th, rev. & exp. ed.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2008), 68.

to the plains of Moab and the giving of instructions for life in Canaan (Deuteronomy). In this overview, land is the dominant concern. The narrative tension is the loss of Eden; the sought-for resolution is gaining the Promised Land. Yet, if this is the point of tension, the story remains unresolved, because the Israelites do not enter the land. Indeed, the account finishes with Moses dying *in Moab*.

For this reason, I think the following is a better way to summarize the story of the Pentateuch.

Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus	Numbers	Deuteronomy
Creation, fall, and loss of access to God's presence	God's presence fills the tabernacle	Living in proximity to God's presence	God's presence goes with Israel	Instructions for ongoing life in God's presence

The overall scheme this time is theological. In the beginning, God formed a (sacred) place in which He and humans could dwell together. Accordingly, the real loss in Genesis 3 is access to God's presence. This is the tension that propels the rest of the story: How can a holy God live with people again? Regaining access to God's presence becomes the dominant theme. Of course, land is still important – Canaan will be the place where God will establish a permanent dwelling place – but it is not the central concern. Thus, the highpoint in Exodus is not rescue from Egypt, but construction of a tabernacle to house God's glory (cf. 40:34-35). In Numbers, God's presence travels with the people through the wilderness. Even though Moses dies outside the Promised Land in Deuteronomy, God remains with His people.

Now, the importance of Leviticus becomes clearer. A holy and terrifying God (cf. Exod. 20:18-19) has come to reside

in the tabernacle, right at the heart of the Israelite camp. Accordingly, Leviticus instructs Israel about how to approach and survive that divine presence. All the book's instructions and regulations now become necessary, vital even.

And it works! Leviticus opens with Yahweh speaking to Moses '*from the tent of meeting*' (Lev. 1:1).³ This simply continues the scene from the end of Exodus where everyone, including Moses, is excluded from the tabernacle when God's glory descends (Exod. 40:34-35). This is the fate of humanity since the Garden: exclusion and separation from the presence of God. But Numbers 1:1 testifies to a profound reversal. Here, echoing the opening words of Leviticus, we read that Yahweh spoke to Moses '*in the tent of meeting*'. Moses entered and survived! How did that happen? Well, that is what the book of Leviticus will explain. It is therefore not all that surprising to find Leviticus placed at the structural, and, arguably, theological, heart of the Pentateuch. This book is crucial.

Structure

When it comes to working out the structure of Leviticus, things are not straightforward. Even a brief skim through the commentaries reveals a bewildering array of options. This serves as a reminder that few biblical books are written so tightly that only one structure is possible.

3. Throughout, I use 'Yahweh' and 'LORD' interchangeably. 'Yahweh' reflects the underlying Hebrew. Following the LXX (i.e. the Greek translation of the Old Testament), 'LORD' is the preferred term in English translations. Each teacher will need to make up his or her own mind. My own practice is to use 'Yahweh' when preaching and teaching at college or in a setting where the name will be understood, but to use 'LORD' when preaching elsewhere.

Nevertheless, there are some divisions within Leviticus that are commonly recognized. These can at least provide a starting point for considering how the book's various sections might fit together.

Chapters 1–7 are tied together by a focus on sacrificial procedures and are concluded by a formal summary statement (7:37–38). Also belonging together are chapters 8–10. The uniting factor this time is genre, which – unusually for Leviticus – is narrative. Chapters 11–15 focus on matters related to ritual purity. Chapter 16, outlining the Day of Atonement, is probably best regarded as an independent unit.

Subdividing chapters 17–27 is more complicated. Chapter 17 deals with sacrifice and the importance of blood. Chapters 18–22 are set apart by the contrast they establish between ‘holy’ and ‘common’ – in relation to the moral purity of the people (18:1–20:27) and the ritual status of priests, sanctuary, and offerings (21:1–22:33). Leviticus 23:1–24:9 is concerned with sacred times (Sabbath and feast days). The short episode in 24:10–23, like chapters 8–10, is narrative and discusses a case of blasphemy. Chapter 25 expands the concept of Sabbath, outlining in turn a ‘Sabbath year’ and a ‘Year of Jubilee’. The highpoint of the book comes in chapter 26 which announces the blessing or cursing that will accompany obedience or disobedience, calling the reader to make a choice. Chapter 27 returns to the topic of voluntary offerings made to Yahweh.

Putting all this together is a matter of some difficulty! Different arrangements are possible depending on which features are given more prominence. I have previously suggested the following outline for the book, arranged

as a palistrophe (chiasm) centered on the Day of Atonement:⁴

- A Instructions for Entering the Tabernacle as Sacred Space (1–7)
- B Narrative about Profanation of Sacred Space (8–10)
- C Separating Clean and Unclean (11–15)
- D The Day of Atonement (16)
- C' Separating Holy and Profane (17:1–24:9)
- B' Narrative about Profanation of Sacred Name (24:10–23)
- A' Instructions for Entering the Land as Sacred Space (25–27)

Jay Sklar arranges the material somewhat differently. He proposes an eight-part structure with a more linear, logical progression:⁵

1. Laws on offerings (1:1–7:38)
2. Public worship at the tabernacle begins (8:1–10:20)
3. Laws on the causes and treatment of ritual purity (11:1–15:33)
4. The Day of Atonement (16:1–34)
5. Laws on the proper slaughtering and eating of animals and the proper use of their blood (17:1–16)

4. G. Geoffrey Harper, '*I Will Walk Among You*: The Rhetorical Function of Allusion to Genesis 1–3 in the Book of Leviticus (BBRSup 21; University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 78.

5. Jay Sklar, *Leviticus* (TOTC 3; Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 78–84.

6. Laws on living as God's holy people (18:1–20:27)
7. Laws on showing due reverence for the Lord's holy things and holy times (21:1–24:23)
8. Laws anticipating life in the Promised Land (25:1–27:34)

Both proposals have merits; each also has drawbacks. This simply demonstrates the difficulty of discerning *the structure of Leviticus*.

Nevertheless, the outlines sketched above provide insight into the overall logic of the book. There is a movement from outlining the cultic procedures and personnel necessary for approaching Yahweh, climaxing with the Day of Atonement, to consideration of the moral and ethical implications for a people invited to live in proximity to God. This does not mean a neat divide between 'ritual' (Lev. 1–16) and 'moral' (Lev. 17–27) concerns, however. As we will see in Part II, these concepts are often intertwined and remain inseparable.

Message

Irrespective of how one decides to divide up Leviticus, the book's central concern is clear: preparing people to live near Yahweh's earthly presence and survive the encounter. Several key words and phrases highlight the theme:

- 'Before Yahweh' and 'tent of meeting' (26 and 34 per cent of Old Testament uses respectively) draw attention to Yahweh's immanent presence which now governs reality for Israel.
- A concentration of the terms 'impure', 'pure', and 'holy' indicates who or what may come, or must be excluded from coming, 'before Yahweh' or into the tent.