



LEVITICUS: HOLINESS CODE

Wann Fanwar, PhD, 2019

Introducing Leviticus

- For many, the book of Leviticus is not the most exciting reading because it appears to be merely a collection of laws and regulations
- However, closer inspection reveals the tremendous significance of the book to an understanding of how God's redeemed people should live or how they are to see themselves
- In that sense, the book is an immediate companion to the book of Exodus with its salvation imageries.
- Leviticus answers a simple question, 'What happens once a person (or people) is saved?'
- (The notes here are an abridged version of a much longer study but do provide a basic foundation for understanding Leviticus)

Structure of Leviticus

- Leviticus is structured according to a concentric pattern with a clear centre
- A quick glance through this structure shows what is the most significant material in the book and provides a handle for better study of the book
- Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement is the centre of the book and the high point of the religious calendar
- The arrangement of materials highlights the Day of Atonement (see below)

1-7 Rituals: Sacrifices and Offerings

8-10 Priestly History

11-15 Clean and Unclean Issues

16 Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)

17-20 Clean and Unclean Issues

21-22 Priestly Legislation

23-25 Rituals: Festivals and Times

26-27 Divine Promise—Human Commitment

The Sacrifices

- Leviticus describes Israel's worship as comprising 2 main types of activities, sacrifices and festivals
- There are 5 main sacrifices in the book
 - *'Olah*. The Burnt Offering was the most common sacrifice and was offered twice every day (1; 6:8-13)
 - *Minkhah*. The Grain Offering is a sacrifice from products of the land and was the first offering mentioned in the Torah, in Genesis 4 (2; 6:14-23)
 - *Shalem*. This is called Peace Offering because the Hebrew word comes from the root *shalom*; it was used for thanksgiving and making vows (3; 7:11-36; 22:17-30; 27)
 - *Khattat*. The Sin Offering was the main sacrifice connected to sin and the size of the offering depended on a person's social position (4:1-5:13; 6:24-30; 12:6-8)

- *'Ashem*. The main use of the Reparation Offering was to repair broken relationships; it was a relationship offering (5:14-6:7; 7:1-6; 14:12-18)
- Sacrifices were mostly animal offerings, but some involved many other things like fruit, grains and cereals, flour and products made from flour

The Festivals

- Leviticus describes 7 main festivals or feasts which Israel were asked to celebrate and these are divided into two groups, spring and autumn festivals
 - *Shabbat*. The Sabbath Day, which came every week was considered a festival, but in addition, some festival days were also called Shabbat, like Yom Kippur or the first and last days of Passover
 - *Pesakh*. The Passover came in the spring and reminded Israel of the Exodus (Exodus 12:2-20; Lev 23:5); it was the most popular festival; was celebrated together with *Matzo*, or Unleavened Bread (23:6-8)
 - *First Fruits*. The Wave Offering or First Fruits was a harvest festival celebrated the day after Sabbath
 - *Shavuot*. The Pentecost was a Harvest festival, also referred to as Feast of Weeks, and celebrated 50 days after First Fruits (Exod 23:16; 34:22; Lev 23:15-21)
 - *Rosh Hashanah*. The Feast of Trumpets was essentially a New Year's festival celebrated in the autumn and announced by the blowing of trumpets (Lev 23:23-25; Num 29:1-6).
 - *Yom Kippur*. The Day of Atonement, celebrated in the autumn, was the most important festival in the religious calendar because on this day the Sanctuary or Tabernacle or Temple was cleansed to signify the total removal of sin (16; 23:26-33)
 - *Sukkot*. The Feast of Booths recalled the 40 years of life in the wilderness after the Exodus; it was also an autumn festival (Lev 23:33-43; Num 29:12-39)

What Holiness Is

- The dominant idea pervading the book is holiness
- Holiness governs everything that is presented in Leviticus, showing that the book is more than legal speak, but rather, is a profound document for the life of God's people
- Holiness is a principal motif in OT; a study of 'holy' is a study of God's essence
- Expressed by Hebrew root qdsh – qadash (to be holy); qodesh (holiness); qadosh (holy)
- Basic meaning of qdsh is 'to be separated from created order' or 'belonging to another realm'; it is God's exclusive attribute because he is other-worldly, he is creator
- Three primary connotations:
 - Holiness is virtually equivalent to deity
 - God shares his holiness
 - Moral holiness is enjoined
- In Leviticus, holiness is seen in two ways:
 - It is implicit in things, places and persons said to be holy
 - It is explicitly stated
- Qdsh is used 140 times in Leviticus but only 17 times in the explicit sense, whereas 123 times it is implied
- The principal idea of the book is that God is holy and his people should also be holy (19:2)
- The sacrifices, the laws and the worship of Israel were tools to help create a holy people
- The Day of Atonement was central to this process because on that day all sin was removed; holiness reached its zenith
- However, a closer look at Leviticus reveals that the concept of 'holy' is displayed even the most common experiences like food and work

Implicit Holiness of God

- Only God is holy but whatever is associated with God is implicitly holy
- Things are considered holy
 - Sacrifices, votive offerings, clothing, crown, fruit, food, tithe, articles in the Sanctuary, houses and fields
 - Sacrifices are often called 'holy of holies' (2:3,10; 6:10; 10:12)
 - Sacrifices and votive offerings (such as animal [27:9], house [27:14] and field [27:21]) are holy because they are separated for special use, for God
- Places are considered holy
 - The Sanctuary and its compartments (5:15; 6:23; 10:4,18) are holy
 - The camp of Israel is holy
 - Any place touched by God, like the burning bush (Exod 3:5; 29:44-45), is holy
- Times is considered holy – the Year of Jubilee, Sabbaths and all Festivals are holy
- Persons and Assemblies are considered holy
 - Israel as a whole was holy (11:45; 19:2); they were a holy nation (Exod 19:6)
 - Priests and Levites were holy (21:6,7,8); they were made holy functionally (Exod 29:1,44)
 - Assemblies of Israel on worship occasions (such as Festival Sabbaths) were holy (Lev 23); these were literally 'assemblies of holiness'
- Implications of implicit holiness:
 - Why are things, places and persons considered holy?
 - How do things, places and persons become holy?
- Two pointers:
 - The use of 'to/for' prepositions – they are holy in relationship to/for Yahweh such as sacrifices and priests
 - The use of possessive mode – they are of/belonging to Yahweh; 'holy sacrifices of Yahweh' or 'feasts of Yahweh'; God referring to an offering as 'My offering' (6:10)
- When God enters the human sphere, everything and everyone he touches becomes holy; holiness is not innate but is derived from God
- Things, places and persons become holy by divine dispensation; God enters the world and chooses things, places or people which then become holy
- Things, places or persons become holy by the contagion of holiness (16:11,20); holiness is transferred through contact with anything or anyone already designated holy (as follows)
 - God → Place → Thing or Person
 - God → Person → Place or Thing
 - God → Thing → Person or Place

Explicit Holiness of God

- There are 17 passages which explicitly state that God is holy
- Holiness self-predication:
 - A holiness formula is used 52 times, occurring mostly in chapters 18-22
 - Chapter 19 records the highest number of occurrences
 - The formula appears in 4 different formats:
 - 'I am Yahweh' – shortest formula
 - 'I am Yahweh your God'
 - 'I, Yahweh, am holy'
 - 'I, Yahweh your God, am holy' – longest formula (19:2)
 - The formula declares God's nature and character
 - The formula is used in 3 types of contexts:
 - It looks back at Israel's deliverance from slavery (e.g., 11:45; 19:34,36; 23:43)
 - It shows that Israel as God's people are expected to be holy (e.g., 11:44; 19:2)
 - It provides motive for response to God (e.g., 18:4,30; 19:3,4,10,25,31)

- Holiness of God's name, being and deeds:
 - 'My holy name' is used 3 times (20:3; 22:2,31-32)
 - Ethical attributes are expressions of God's being; to say God is holy is equivalent to saying he is
 - Divine activity is also an expression of God's holiness
 - God delivers (11:45)
 - He selects Israel and makes her holy (20:26)
 - God's activities are holy as he is; he bestows his holiness on persons, places and things (20:8; 21:8,15,23; 22:9,16,32)
- God's activity is dual-edged:
- It is redemptive (God saves) and retributive (God judges)
 - Demonstrated in the structure of the book
 - Revealed through the sacrificial system
 - Modelled in the services of Yom Kippur

Implications of God's holiness

- Holiness is more comprehensive than morality
- God defines holiness as the nature of the covenant and provides motivation to one's behaviour
- Holiness is a grateful response to prior divine action and being
- Holiness presupposes a person's involvement with his or her society
- Demand for Holiness: it is required of Israel if she is to remain tuned to her centre (God)
 - 'You shall be holy for I am holy' says Yahweh (11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7,26; 21:6-8); to imitate God or have a spiritual likeness to God; it means to become God's possession
 - God manifested his presence to Israel (Exod 25:8; Num 9:15-23); God's presence implies that all of life should be oriented to this centre
 - The demand was predicated by Israel's special relationship with Yahweh; to maintain this relationship it was imperative that Israel be like her God
 - Holiness was required of both laity (11:44-45; 19:2) and clergy (21:6-8)
- Lifestyle Holiness: for God's people, holiness becomes a lifestyle
 - God's holiness is the model of individual and community life
 - God's people are to visibly embody his character
- Lev 19 serves as a microcosm of how this works and incorporates holiness into every aspect of life
 - Religious: Sabbath (19:3,30), idolatry issues (19:4,26,31) and cultic considerations (19:5-7,27-28) are holy
 - Social: relation to parents or elders (19:3,32) and other relationships (19:11-12,14,16-17,20-22,29) are holy
 - Political: judicial practices (19:15,18) and race relationships (19:33-34) are holy
 - Economic: agricultural and pastoral regulations (19:9-10,19,23-25) and business dealings (19:13,35-36) pertain to holiness
 - Personal: dietary issues (19:26 cf. chapters 11 and 17) are about holiness
- The pursuit of holiness should be a human aspiration
- Holiness implies that divine purpose runs through all existence
- Holiness is defined in terms of relationship to parents, children, God, the poor and stranger, women, one's neighbours, the aged and elderly, animals and the soil
- A person who breaks with this centre is destroyed (10:1-3)

The Food Laws

- As part of the attempt to create a holy people, God gave strict rules about food, what they could or could not eat

- Among Christians, there are 2 main views about these food laws
 - Some say Leviticus' food laws have no Christian application
 - Others believe they should be applied as still relevant to Christian lifestyle
- The food laws are recorded mainly in chapters 11 and 17
- Leviticus 11 lists the so-called 'Forbidden Foods' or creatures that could not be part of Israel's diet
 - Clean and unclean. Living creatures were divided into 2 categories and those animals considered clean could be eaten
 - God decided the categories and only God can determine what is clean and unclean
 - Categories of unclean. The chapter shows that there are 3 criteria which makes an animal unclean
 - An animal which takes life, a hunter or predator, is unclean and could not be eaten
 - An animal which eats the dead, a scavenger, is unclean and could not be eaten
 - An animal which lives in 2 worlds, omnivorous, is unclean and could not be eaten
- The best view of these categories is offered in the listing of birds provided in Leviticus 11
- During the Middle Ages, Jewish rabbis put together a list of birds and fish for food which included chicken (no word for chicken in biblical Hebrew) and tuna
- Closer inspection shows that chicken is omnivorous and tuna is a hunter.
 - The main principles.
 - Taking life is against every instinct of God
 - Dead things contaminate
 - Mixture is the very essence of sin
- Leviticus 17 lists 'Forbidden food' within the clean and edible category
 - Verses 1-9: Slaughtering animals
 - Slaughtering animals may only occur in the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle
 - Slaughtering animals in the camp or outside the camp equals 'murder' (Lev 17:4 says 'blood is counted against that man')
 - Slaughtering equals sacrifice and only animals fit for sacrifice were fit for food
 - Verses 10-16: Blood and carcass
 - Eating blood or carcass incurs God's anger
 - Blood symbolises life and was used for making atonement and therefore cannot be eaten
 - Carcass contaminates and serves as symbol of the contagion of sin; eating carcass would create a false symbol.
- Most people who follow chapter 11, tend to ignore chapter 17
- The Jews follow both chapters equally and created 'kosher' meat as a result; this is meat without blood or fat
- If Leviticus 17 is followed, meat eating becomes pointless and difficult
- God clearly intended the pattern of Genesis 1 to be the dominant one; meat has always been only a concession
- The main point of these food laws was to teach Israel that holiness requires separation from normal things even in food

Assortment of Laws

- The Rabbis contend that there are 613 (a bit debatable) commands in the Torah, the bulk of which are in Leviticus
- The laws may be further divided into judgements, testimonies and decrees (based on different Hebrew words, *mitsvot*, *edot* and *khukim*)
- There are 2 main types of commands

- Positive commands (about 248) include laws about worship, temple and priests, sacrifices, vows, ritual purity, Tithes and offerings, Sabbatical Year, food laws, Feasts and Sabbaths, community duty to Yahweh, worship of false gods and related issues, times of trial and persecution, human-human responsibility, family, judgement and slaves.
- Negative commands (about 365) include laws about worship of false gods and related practices, making alliances with other nations, blasphemy, Sanctuary, sacrifice-tithes-offerings, priests, dietary issues, Nazirites, agriculture, business dealings and slaves, judicial protocols, inappropriate sexual behaviour and kingship
- The actual number of laws may be disputed but the import of the laws is not since these laws were an intentional roadmap regarding holiness
- Laws in the book of Leviticus also may be divided roughly into 2 types: laws about the worship system and lifestyle laws
- Laws about worship revolved around the sacrifices, festivals, purification rituals and rituals pertaining to the priesthood
- Lifestyle Laws covered every contingency of life as relevant to the time and period, from agriculture to personal hygiene, from food to sexuality, from national to neighbourly protocols, from family to community relationships and from human commitment to divine promise; the laws were comprehensive
- Evident lesson is that every aspect of Israel's life mattered to Yahweh, a lesson still relevant today