

# LEVITICUS 1-7

Offerings and Sacrifices





## ... thoughts and prayers on passages from Leviticus

After the exodus from Egypt – the great salvation event in Old Testament (OT) history – Israel was encamped at Mount Sinai for a period of eleven months and twenty days. The account of that encampment extends from Exodus 19-40, through all of Leviticus, continuing up to Numbers 10:10 – that is, some 59 chapters of biblical text! This Sinai event remains central to the history of Israel and the words of Leviticus are at the heart of Israel’s identity as the people of God.

The Hebrew title for Leviticus was “and he called.” It accurately captures the essence of the book – the words of God calling to his people from the newly constructed Tabernacle. These words are uttered within a discernible historical time frame – exactly one month passes between the end of Exodus and the beginning of Numbers. (See Exodus 40:17 and Numbers 1:1) All the laws recounted in the book are given within this narrative setting.

Dillard and Longman comment: “The single most obvious characteristic of the book is its clear and simple structure. The high incidence of law and ritual necessitates a straightforward presentation. The purpose of the book is to provide guidelines to priests and laypeople concerning appropriate behaviour in the presence of a holy God, thus the emphasis is on communicating information, not on subtle or artificial literary plays.”<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, Paul House has distinguished five distinct blocks of literary material, “each connected to the other by a narrative framework and each held together separately by distinctive phrases, or catchwords.”<sup>2</sup>



## Leviticus 1:1-9

### Focus thoughts

Leviticus – along with books such as Chronicles, Nahum and Obadiah – ranks among the least read of all biblical texts. This is not to say the book is considered unimportant. It is not even to say that occasional sayings from Leviticus, such as “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18) are not well-known. It is however to assert that in our times and places there is a widely held view that Leviticus is tedious, possibly boring, certainly hard to read. We beg to disagree!

If one wants to understand God’s holiness, Leviticus is the critical starting point. The basic Hebrew word for “holy” and “holiness” is found well over 100 times in this book. Furthermore, if one wants to comprehend NT books such as Hebrews, Leviticus is the essential foundation. A firm grasp of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the meaning of his sacrifice on the cross, cannot be had without Leviticus. It is time to reclaim this neglected book for impassioned reading, discussion, prayer and obedience by all who seek to live faithful lives in our era.

The title of the book, “Leviticus”, is a major contributor to the problem. Hebrew readers did not know the book by this name in ancient times. They knew it by its initial words: “And he called.” This was its title. Each of the three words is significant.

- “And” – although the little word “and” does not appear in most English translations, it is nevertheless crucial for an understanding of this book. We must again appreciate the intimate relationship between Leviticus and the preceding book of Exodus, particularly its final chapter. Although in ancient times, these scrolls were not bound together in a book as we have them, they were nevertheless thought of as seamlessly connected in terms of content. A single story is being told. And not only Leviticus but also Exodus and Numbers commence with the little word “and.” Genesis and Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers tell a single story. Then Deuteronomy pauses to reflect. As twenty-first century readers we need a fresh awareness of the continuity of the biblical story. The little word “and” is critically important in this regard.
- “He” – Leviticus is about Yahweh, the unmatched creator of all things, the holy God of Israel. We must again appreciate that the Bible is firstly about God, not us. We read to know him.
- “Called” – the words of Leviticus were called out. Almost all the text that follows is Yahweh calling. And his calling raises many questions for us as readers of printed text. What was his voice like? The tone ... the volume ... the pace ... the language? What was it like to hear the voice of Yahweh? Our imaginations need to be fired by this called-out text if we are to read Leviticus well.

Yahweh called to Moses from the newly constructed tabernacle, the remarkable “tent of meeting” – a phrase used over 40 times in Leviticus – pitched in the middle of Israel’s camp. From this tent, the words of Leviticus were spoken over a one month period.<sup>3</sup>

And what is at the heart of God’s call? It may be summarised by the words of Leviticus 20:26: “You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.”



The holy God calls a holy people to himself, charging them to represent him among the nations. This is a thematic statement for the concerns of the entire Bible and when John speaks of Jesus Christ as the Word who “became flesh and dwelt among us,” he draws on the language of Exodus and Leviticus, portraying Jesus as the new tabernacling, the personal tenting of God, no longer indwelling curtains and bars and frames and bases, as in the tent at Mount Sinai, rather indwelling humanness as the man Jesus Christ. As John writes: “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”<sup>4</sup> This is a greater glory and grace than that known during the time of Moses, however it is grounded in and continuous with God’s word through the book of Leviticus. Let us respond with both passion and awe as we read and then seek to be the holy people of God through the risen Christ in our times and places.

### **Prayer**

“Holy, Holy, Holy, LORD God Almighty, early in the morning our song shall rise to thee ...” Father God, we remember the words of the old hymn as we seek to serve you this day, and we are awed that you invite us into your holy presence to live as your holy people in this time and place. Father, we thank you for the young people in our care. We thank you for the influence that we can have over them. As they watch and listen to us, we pray they will be wooed by your holiness in us, through the risen Christ, by the power of his Holy Spirit. We commit this day to you now, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## **Leviticus 1:10-17**

### **Focus Thoughts**

I brought my best lamb, a young male, one year old. We had nothing better to offer. So I carried it to the meeting tent and Eleazar the priest inspected it carefully. He said it was acceptable. I was pleased. But I noticed my heart was racing. I had spoken with my wife Miriam about our offering. This lamb was beautiful, but we would give it to Yahweh. He was holy and yet loved us. We didn’t deserve that! We felt so unworthy – and when the blinding light filled the tent, so conscious of our failures. Yahweh had chosen to speak with us. He had come to live with us. It was unimaginable! We gave our lamb because we loved him. The sacrifice was worth it. It didn’t make everything right, but it was the best we could do to show the LORD that in our hearts we were so grateful.

I placed my left hand on the lamb’s head. In that quiet moment, I and the lamb were one. “Forgive me, LORD.” I thanked Yahweh for his mercy as I plunged the dull knife in its neck. And I told the LORD I loved him when the blood spurted into Eleazar’s bowl. My beautiful lamb lay lifeless in my arms. I watched without speaking as it was skinned and cut and washed. Eleazar sprinkled the blood on the sides of the altar. Then we laid the pieces on the wood-fire and burned it completely. My lamb was consumed in the flames. The smoke rising to the heavens was briefly thick and pungent. But Eleazar said it was pleasing to the LORD. I watched till only cinders remained. Then I walked home at peace ...

This ritual of the burnt offering seems strange as we read the first chapter of Leviticus. Yet it is so crucial to an understanding of this book and indeed of scripture more widely, that we dare



not miss its significance. To young people, our children and students, it must be even stranger. In our secularised western nations, any sense of the holy and the sacred, and conversely of the polluted and the profane, is almost completely gone. If it remains, it has been relegated to ancient cathedrals, silent orders and other such hallowed spaces away from the public arena. Any suggestion that the whole earth belongs to God, and that places of business and education, kitchens and boardrooms, forests and beaches are also holy places where the LORD is present, is barely uttered.

Yet in Leviticus, Israel understood that they could only live in fellowship with holy Yahweh on his terms. Burnt offerings (1:1-17), along with grain (2:1-16), peace (3:1-17), sin (4:1-5:13), and guilt offerings (5:14-6:7), were required. They were brought every day. Burnt offerings were sacrificed twice each day, in the morning and at twilight. And extra offerings were given on Sabbaths and feast days. The priests ensured that the altar fire never went out.

New Testament authors portray the death of Jesus as a burnt offering – a voluntary, final offering at the cross. In the words of Hebrews, “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”<sup>5</sup> And like the incinerated bulls, sheep, goats and birds, but in far fuller measure, his willing sacrifice is portrayed by Paul as a fragrant aroma in the nostrils of God.<sup>6</sup>

How then should we live? Gratefully. With gratitude, recognising that our acceptance in the eyes of a holy God is now secured through the blood of Jesus. But more than this, Paul is clear as he writes to believers in Rome, that like Jesus their lives also must become as burnt offerings, that like Jesus they also must offer their entire humanness in service to God. Paul is not thinking primarily in terms of dying for God, rather in living for him, in not being conformed to the world, in being renewed of mind and in knowing and obeying God’s will, when he writes: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”<sup>7</sup> Such goals must be ours today as we live for God in the twenty-first century. May we undertake our tasks in holiness, as living sacrifices, completely offered to the LORD. And may our students imitate us.

### **Prayer**

LORD, like burnt offerings we would be set apart for you today. May our service be as a fragrant aroma before your throne of grace. We thank you for Jesus and for his complete offering of himself at Calvary. We thank you that in dying, he paid the price for sin. We thank you that his Holy Spirit indwells us that we might be sanctified people. We pray our minds would be renewed and we ask that we would inspire young people to offer themselves to you to become all that you want them to be. May we know your good, acceptable and perfect will in this place today. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.



<sup>1</sup>Dillard, R. and Longman, T. (1994). p.76

<sup>2</sup>House, P. (1998).

<sup>3</sup>See Exodus 40:17 and Numbers 1:1

<sup>4</sup>John 1:14

<sup>5</sup>Hebrews 10:10

<sup>6</sup>Ephesians 5:1-2

<sup>7</sup>Romans 12:1-2