

### LEVITICUS

#### Lesson 1 - Introduction

The title of the book of Leviticus, itself, tells us much about what it offers. It is named after the tribe of Levi.....pronounced “Leh-vee”....one of the original 12 tribes of Israel (who were formed, if you recall, by the 12 sons of Jacob). But, **this** tribe was quite unique; God separated and divided it away from the other tribes of Israel, and then adopted it. He adopted Levi away from Jacob, just as Jacob had adopted Ephraim and Manessah away from Joseph. Levi became a special tribe, set apart for service to God; a tribe of priests to Yehoveh.

Before Leviticus was called “Leviticus”, the Hebrews called it “Torat Kohanim”..... literally **priest teachings**. In our western way of thinking, we might say “priestly instructions”, or more to the point, Instruction of the Priests. You get the idea. The Hebrew name used **today** for the book of Leviticus, is “Vayikra” which means, “now He called”. These are the very first words of the book of Leviticus, and the Hebrews eventually named each book of the Torah according to the opening phrase of each book.

Those of us living in the early years of this the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium A.D. are indeed fortunate. Because only in the last 20 years has new scholarship, resulting from archeological finds and breakthroughs in the understanding of ancient Hebrew and its cognate language Akkadian, begun to shed revealing new light on the meaning and explanation of the strange and obscure rituals contained within the book of Leviticus. Altar sacrifice primarily of animals, which is the primary thrust of Leviticus, ceased with the destruction of Herod’s Temple in Jerusalem nearly 2000 years ago. That same event also marked the end of operation of the priestly class. The main purpose for priests was to conduct the rituals that could be performed ONLY in the Jerusalem Temple, now obliterated. With the nearly complete expulsion of Jews from the Holy Land at the hand of the Roman Empire and with the thorough removal of Jewish thought from a gentile-ized Christianity that erupted by the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> Century A.D., both Jews and Christians found themselves with little basis for understanding God’s teaching, principles, and instructions contained in Leviticus.

During the Middle Ages (which began around the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD and lasted for 1000 years) it was illegal for all but Church authorities to own, and therefore study, scripture; so the staunchly anti-Semitic Popes and Bishops were able to tightly control Biblical “knowledge and truth”; and, at the same time, they squelched any attempt to explore Biblical events that had occurred before the birth of the Church....that is, the OT became locked away and rendered obsolete. Matters such as the Hebrew sacrificial system were particularly shunned due to their blatant Jewishness.

By the time we in this room were born not only had Christianity all but divested itself of the Old Testament, the Church was well on its way to reducing the New Testament to little else than the 4 gospels. The basis of faith for the modern Christian is a set of principles that have further distilled the scriptures into what we call Church **doctrines**; of course the doctrines vary significantly depending on which one of the few thousand Christian sects or denominations a Believer might choose to belong to.

For their part Traditional Jews have long ago relegated the Hebrew Bible..... Holy Scripture.....to 2<sup>nd</sup> place; instead, Judaism favors the voluminous works of Jewish Rabbinical commentary, called the Talmud, as their spiritual authority. However the sudden return of the Jews to their ancient homeland, and the unexpected rebirth of that homeland into the nation of Israel in 1948, has forced many of us to return to the Scriptures, particularly the Old Testament, to revisit many of the concepts, prophecies, principles and people that had been treated by the Church as long dead and irrelevant. Concepts that really aren't reflected or addressed in Christian doctrinal-based theology, nor do they jibe with the often philosophical, humanistic, sectarian, and political viewpoints of Rabbinical Judaism.

Yeshua of Nazareth was the fulfillment of all that the sacrificial system of Leviticus pointed to; the Hebrews of Yeshua's day, however, due to relying on Tradition while relegating the Holy Scriptures to a dusty shelf, failed to see that important connection made primarily by the ancient prophets. Christians, on the other hand, are very familiar with the church **doctrine** that Jesus is the sacrifice for our sin.....at least those **words** are mouthed often from pulpits and platforms of most Christian denominations. Yet how can a Believer who has absolutely no understanding of the Biblical sacrificial system that was the prophetic shadow of Christ's work, comprehend the NEED for, the meaning behind, and the impact of Jesus being a sacrifice (except, perhaps, in its shallowest, simplest sense)? Next week we will explore a fascinating and little known aspect of Yeshua bringing to perfection God's principles of sacrifice, substitution, and release.

It is said that we will probably never fully grasp the depths of the transaction that took place on that bloodied execution stake in 30 A.D. If we refuse to open the earliest part of the Bible I can assure you that will remain the same for you. But, I can equally assure you that with a better understanding of God's ordained sacrificial system, as detailed in Leviticus, a deeper appreciation of what Christ did, why He did it, and how marvelous and wondrous God's plan of redemption is, awaits us. Yehoveh did not give us Leviticus as a historical oddity, or something that was intended only for study by great Biblical scholars and historians. Neither is Leviticus for use only by Jewish priests, both ancient and future, when the Temple that will be rebuilt, soon, in Jerusalem and we will once again see the blood of bulls and sheep flowing, and the smoke of the Brazen Altar billowing heavenward 7 days a week. Rather, this unique book is there to show us perhaps THE major element of Yehoveh's justice system, His Mishpat, which is intended to restore mankind to relationship with God; and that major element is substitutionary sacrifice and the resultant release from our debt that it brings.

As we move through Leviticus pay special attention to a fundamental God-principle that will be set before us at every turn; a principle that is practically the opposite of traditional doctrinal-based church teaching: it is the principle that God divides, elects, and separates. He makes

distinctions and draws boundaries. Due to the distance the modern Church has slowly and surely put between itself and the actual words of the Holy Scripture, we mistakenly cry out for unity at any cost, as though uniform agreement to a manmade doctrine is Godly. Today the body of Messiah seeks widespread IN-clusion above all else. And this inclusion is accomplished by means of consensus, conformity, and tolerance. So far throughout our study of Genesis and Exodus we've witnessed ANYTHING but tolerance and inclusion by God; rather, what we've seen is Yehoveh dividing light from darkness, evil from good, truth from deception, chaos from order, Israel from everyone else; as we examine the sacrificial system we will see these same kinds of divisions and distinctions established between clean and unclean, holy and profane, divine and fleshly, priestly and common. Ritual purity, sexuality, and diet will all be divided into the acceptable and the UN-acceptable. We will continue to see that the UN-acceptable is **not** tolerated by Yehoveh, and those who act out the unacceptable will be EX-cluded from membership in the group called "His people" .....Israel.

Leviticus will give us the **Priestly** worldview. Why is that important to **us**? Because we have been declared priests. As Disciples of Yeshua WE are the priests of the Kingdom of God, whose Lord is Jesus of Nazareth. This is a label which most of us take allegorically or metaphorically..... I mean, we're not really literal PRIEST- PRIESTS, right? Just KINDA **like** priests. Of all the Christian clichés printed on T-shirts and ball caps I don't think I've ever seen one that said: "I'm a priest of Yehoveh". Have you?

Open your Bibles to Revelation 1.

### READ REV.1:1-6

I detect nothing allegorical or metaphorical about this statement, do you? We have been officially included as priests of God due to our faith in Yeshua, just as God declared the tribe of Levi to be His set apart priests in ancient times. Now just what does being a priest entail? Maybe it would be a good idea if we found out since that's how the Lord sees us. That is exactly why we'll study Leviticus very carefully; we are going to find out how Yehoveh looks at His priests, and what He expects of them....of US. Keep in mind, however, that He sees us within the context of the spiritual realm and less in the earthly.

St. Paul, in Romans 15:4 says this: "**Whatever was written in former times was written for OUR learning, so that with the encouragement of the Scriptures we might patiently hold on to our hope**". Paul, in saying what "was written" and "the Scriptures", was obviously not referring to the New Testament, which did not yet exist; he was speaking of the Torah...and of the Hebrew Bible...what we call the OT. So, how shall we, as modern Believers approach the instructions contained in Leviticus? Paul says, in general, it's there for our learning. So, let's learn it.

Today, and for centuries past, it seems as though Bible commentators tend to lean toward one of two general mindsets when dealing with Leviticus: either they gentile-ize and Christian-ize it to the point that every single thing that occurs had ONLY to do with Jesus and the Church, and therefore every detail symbolized some element of his future ministry; or they write it off as little

more than an interesting historical stage in the development of ancient Israel as a society, that it applied only to Israel and therefore has no relevance whatsoever to us. So my challenge has been how to describe and present to you this awesome book (so rarely taught within the church), and its important contents, in the way God wants, with the relevance He intends for us to apprehend.

Of all the wonderful and insightful and thoughtful documents, research papers, and commentaries on Leviticus that I have studied, I most identify with the approach of Gordon Wenham, who validates both the historical realities and the abiding and eternal theological values that are resident in Leviticus. That is, though he doesn't quite characterize Leviticus in particular, nor the Bible in general, by using the term I have coined for characterizing the overall nature of God's Word.....which is the **Reality of Duality**.....the result is the same. Wenham does not see Leviticus as an "either/or" proposition. That is, there is no reason to make Leviticus EITHER exclusively historical literature OR exclusively theological instruction. Wenham concludes, as do I, that the physical and the spiritual, the historical and the theological, exist side by side, simultaneously. The Reality of Duality is just my way of illustrating a deep spiritual mystery; that there are two dimensions, dual planes, of reality that run along together, like the left and right side of a railroad track. It's the pair of tracks that make a complete railroad track, right? One track, by itself, is but a half-a- railroad track. Now, continuing with that Railroad track illustration, of the two tracks, one represents the real tangible physical manifestation of God's pronouncements; it's what we're familiar with, because it's what our senses can detect.....that which we can see, and touch, smell and hear. It's the physical world that is all around us.

The other track is generally invisible to us; it's the spiritual side of the track. It represents the Spirit World.....Heaven, Hell, our own invisible human spirits, and the absolutely real but invisible **spiritual** world that surrounds us. The two tracks run along in parallel; the physical side being a complement to the spiritual side. As we discussed at length in the last half of Exodus, the Tabernacle is a prime example of the Reality of Duality principle in operation. The Wilderness Tabernacle was the physical earthly replica of God's Heavenly Spiritual Tabernacle. They existed simultaneously.....both completely real. But for humans one could be seen, the other existed unseen.

What is so difficult for us humans to deal with, though, is that it is the invisible spiritual reality that far exceeds anything possible in the physical. The spiritual has NO limitations. The physical has nothing **but** limitations. So, whatever is manifested physically is automatically inferior to its spiritual counterpart. Please note that I said INFERIOR, not worthless or bad.

What we also find as a general Biblical principle is that God's pronouncements, His laws and commands and systems, do not become obsolete or end, but they do **transform**. Transform means that the nature of the underlying structure remains, but the outward appearance changes and often how it operates changes. Often this transformation takes place via substitution. And it is this transformation and substitution that most interests me, because the God-ordained sacrificial system is for all intents and purposes alive and well, today... simply transformed; let me explain. Physically speaking, the Levitical sacrificial system, which involves the killing of specified animals, is no longer PHSYICALLY practiced (but it will be, again, in the

near future); yet, the spiritual parallel of that sacrificial system continues to exist. The **physical** aspect of the sacrificial system did not become obsolete, because a physical sacrifice and the shedding of blood were still necessary for atonement of sin; however the sacrificial system did undergo a transformation..... by making Jesus the perfect and permanent physical sacrifice for atonement of sins that was formerly temporarily and accomplished by the slaying of prescribed animals. From that same physical aspect, which by nature is subject to the constraints of time and space, we can also say that Christ's atoning death has already occurred, its in the past, almost 2000 years in the past, right? From a spiritual point of view though, which is NOT constrained by time and space, Christ's sacrifice has no beginning nor end. We don't actually rely on something that is old, or in the past; in the spiritual realm, His death is ongoing and present; the reason for it's purpose hasn't ever ended; it is STILL needed for every soul who wishes to have peace with God and live eternally in His light.

I tell you this, because I want you to understand that Leviticus is as relevant to us, today, as it was to the Israelites who were but a year removed from subjugation in Egypt. That the principles God is introducing in Leviticus are identical to the ones Christ manifested, and spiritually speaking, is still manifesting.

Now let me set the stage for you.....to put Leviticus in its historical context and to lay out its structure..... both being important elements in understanding what we'll be reading.

While the 1<sup>st</sup> book of the Torah, Genesis, is the book of beginnings, and Deuteronomy, the 5<sup>th</sup> and final book of the Torah is a sermon expounding on the Law, these two books **surround**, act as bookends if you would, to the 3 middle books of Torah: Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. The beauty of studying the Torah, and the OT in general, is that it is, generally speaking, sequential. That is it follows a timeline and reads like a novel; a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is unlike the NT, which, apart from the 4 Gospels, is primarily a collection of letters, memos, each of which stood alone; originally these letters from Paul, Peter, James, and others sought to deal with specific issues that arose at specific church locations in the earliest formative days of Christianity BEFORE it became gentile dominated. Therefore, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers all run together and work together. If these 3 books had no boundary markers telling us where one book ended and the next began we might actually get a BETTER overall sense of their meaning. Since they **do** have boundary markers in the form of titles and chapters, then we need to think of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers as a book series. Like the currently popular Left Behind series, each book has its own beginning and end. Yet each book is also designed to link with the others in the series, in a certain order. Without reading them all, in order, the information we get is only partial and therefore the story is incomplete. Leviticus, being the middle book of the series, necessitates that we link it with all that came before (in Exodus) and all that will follow in Numbers in order to view it in its fullest context.

So Leviticus is the middle book of the entire Torah. And, as such it is the **heart** of Torah, its focus and center. It is the center shaft of the Menorah. Completely unlike the other 4 books the setting of Leviticus is limited to but one place only: the Holy Mountain, Mt. Sinai also called Mt. Horeb. And, Leviticus answers for us the most basic question any thoughtful Believer is eventually drawn to; and that question is well posed by the prophet Micah who asked, **"With**

***what shall I approach Yehoveh, Do homage to Elohim on high?***” The answer comes to us in Leviticus 19:2, which is ***“You shall be holy, for I, Yehoveh your Elohim, am holy”***. (Hopefully those two Hebrew words Yehoveh and Elohim are completely familiar to you, by now. But, for those newer to Torah, Yehoveh is God’s actual personal name, and Elohim is a word that means “God”).

Just as Leviticus is central to the Torah, **holiness** is central to Leviticus. If WHAT we’re to approach God with is “holiness”, just HOW is one to **attain** holiness? For the Levite priests, holiness involved much sacred ritual. You might be surprised to know, however, that much of the holiness ritual in Leviticus was also required of the Hebrew lay people....the common folk. The Levite priests tended to act as the attendants or the officiators of the rituals and sacrifices; later, they were the instructors to the people about ritual and sacrifice; but right from the beginning the regular common Hebrew man performed many of the ceremonial acts, usually including the slaying of the sacrificial animals. This was a unique concept to the ancient world. Priests of the other religions of the time were the ONLY ones who were required to follow the strict rituals... not the people. It was exclusively those priests who were subject to the dietary laws, sexual taboos, and purity provisions of their religion.

But for Israel every man played a bit of a priestly role. Every man participated in prescribed ways. Every man had restrictions for diet, sexuality, purity, and so forth. And, we will see these requirements for the common Hebrew man listed in Leviticus. So centuries before Christ pronounced to St. John that every member of His Church, his followers: every disciple of Yeshua was a priest (as we saw in Rev. 1). Beginning with Moses the duties of priesthood slowly made their way from the common family, to the sole providence of the priest-class as represented by the single tribe of Levi, and then back into the common-class provided that common-class trusted Jesus as their Messiah.

This complex system of rituals that God introduced in Leviticus would have in no way felt strange to the Israelites. Certainly of some of the principles and ritual details commanded by Yehoveh no society had ever before been known; the chief one of this heretofore unknown principle was the prohibition against the use of god-images. But animal sacrifices and agriculturally based religious festivals and sacrificial offerings to gods had been standard operating procedure for most of the ancient world since long before Israel came into existence. The establishment of a set apart priestly class was also typical....this was nothing Israel would have found odd.

We shouldn’t be surprised or alarmed at this historical fact....that animal sacrifice to a god was old news. Upon exiting the Ark Noah, the one chosen to repopulate the earth, performed a ritual animal sacrifice. The Godly principle of animal sacrifice had been laid down even earlier than Noah and it was the center of the controversy which led to the death of Abel at the hand of his brother Cain, when God made it clear that He found Abel’s offering of an animal acceptable, but Cain’s offering of plant life UN-acceptable.

After the Flood all humanity would take their cue from Noah in how to relate to God.....at least that was the case for a time. Noah was well familiar with God’s ways and those ways are reflected in ancient legal code named after Noah: the Noachide Laws. St. Paul even refers to

these 7 Noachide Laws in the book of Acts. In general, the Noachide Laws are: 1) no idolatry, 2) no blasphemy (cursing God or using His name in a false vow), 3) no murder, 4) no stealing, 5) no immoral sex, 6) no drinking blood or eating a live animal, and 7) man is to establish a human government in order to administer God's justice system. These Noachide Laws will eventually form the basis for the 10 Commandments as given to Moses.

Within a few hundred years of the Great Flood though a powerful world leader named Nimrod led much of the earth's population into open revolt against God; and the real basis of that rebellion was their refusal to obey the 7 Noachide Laws. Of course this revolt had been brewing for some time as people fell away from Yehoveh, and Nimrod was simply the catalyst and leader.

Where I'm heading is that it was **not** that God took a perverted, existing manmade system of sacrifice, law and ritual, and then adapted and used that perverted mess as the basis for His system of holiness as found in Leviticus. It was the other way around. Yehoveh first introduced His sacrificial/holiness system to mankind through Adam, and then re-introduced it through the 2<sup>nd</sup> Adam.... Noah. Noah taught his sons about God's justice/holiness system and his sons taught their offspring and so on. But, as men do, some folks began to ignore God's principles and others started their own religious cults; that is they added their own deceived thoughts to God's instructions and the slide down the slippery slope to false worship, idolatry, gathered speed. It culminated at the Tower of Babel when the world was again thoroughly wicked, just as before the Flood. Nimrod is credited as being the patriarch of what the Bible calls the "Mystery Babylon Religions". And of course these false religions took what the whole world already knew were God's standards as handed down by Noah and twisted them to conform to their wants, their sinful and selfish natures, and soon they were building altars to false gods and using God's holiness system in a perverted and unauthorized way. Animal sacrifice quickly turned to human sacrifice. Sexual prohibitions turned to incest, homosexuality, and religious prostitution. Various reptiles, birds, amphibians, mammals, and humans became god-images.

Like most deceptions these false religions and their pagan rituals had at their core, a degree of divine truth. But the truth became wrapped in lies and was now barely recognizable as having been, at one time, pure and God-ordained. Leviticus would straighten that out and put man back onto the proper path in the worship of Yehoveh. But just as the path straightening that began after the Flood was with one man, Noah, this latest path straightening would begin with one people, Israel, through one Mediator, Moses.

Interestingly these ancient pagan worship practices that existed well before and during the time of Moses offer us a solid basis for believing the authenticity of Leviticus. I point this out because many Bible scholars suggest that Leviticus does NOT come from the days of the Exodus, but a much later time.....around the time of the Jews' exile to Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. More recent archaeological and documentary evidence, however, once again validates not just the authenticity of Leviticus but points to its origination as being around the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. It is when we compare the archaeological and documentary evidence of Middle Eastern societies of this same era....from Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia..... to what is contained in Leviticus that we see the unmistakable similarities. Much evidence has been

recently unearthed about the vast and flourishing Hittite culture; and in that we find even more examples of the literary form of Leviticus as well as the religious practices of that era. We not only have written documents we now have pictorials found on walls and monuments that verify and flesh-out what these pagan cultic practices looked like. And, as one would expect, they fit well within what is laid down in Leviticus.

It is strange that modern scholars do not in the least question whether what is written from Ugaritic or Egyptian temple documents actually took place. Yet so many of these same scholars see the Bible's description of the Israelite's religious practices as untrustworthy or pure fantasy simply because it is the Bible. Admittedly there HAVE been some redactions to the Holy Texts of the Bible over the centuries. Look around at the scores and scores of Bible versions we have available to us today as but a modern example of that. Yet with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls we find that the variations within the Bible texts from the time just before Christ to now are very minor.....utterly insignificant. So there is no reason for us to take Leviticus for anything other than what it is; the original Hebrew priestly and sacrificial system given by God to Moses on Mt.Sinai.

That said there is strong evidence that some of the **terminology** in Leviticus, and throughout the Bible, has been changed over time. What is particularly noticeable about Leviticus is that much terminology that deals with an agricultural society is used. That would well fit Israel some years later after they had settled in Canaan; but at the time of the original writing of Leviticus the Hebrews were like Bedouins.....desert wanderers..... not farmers. Scholars and teachers have wrestled with this and many other aspects of the Bible in trying to determine what is original and what has been altered. One thing is certain: in all the various ancient scripture documents found and examined, no matter from what culture or what language nor even from what era, the intent and meaning, principles and prophecies, and the stated attributes of Yehoveh found in those documents has remained unchanged. And that is the near unanimous conclusion of even the harshest of Bible critics and minimalists.

Did Israel faithfully follow this priestly plan of holiness that was written down in Leviticus? In general it was fully obeyed only sporadically; and how closely to the original it was followed varied in degree from era to era. For instance, one of the base instructions of the Torah is that the family of Aaron was to form the line of High Priests. Somewhere in history that ended. At Shiloh some priests from Moses' line were running the priesthood. By the time of David, the family of Zadok, a descendant of Aaron, took over that role again.....and nothing in the Bible addresses either the reason or the timing for this change. As time rolled on there even became competing priesthoods and temples. In Jesus' time the hated Samaritans had built their own separate Temple up in Samaria, on Mt. Gerizim, and had their own version of the Torah (technically known as the Samaritan Pentateuch); they had their own priests and their own rituals, etc; none of which was recognized as legitimate by the mainstream Jerusalem-based Judaism. Seven centuries before that Israel, which at that time had been split into the two kingdoms of Ephraim-Israel and Judah, each had their own priests, sacrificial locations, and unique worship practices.

So one can only imagine the variation that would occur over the centuries in the carrying out of the rituals we will read about in Leviticus. But in the end we must continue to grasp that



## Lesson 1 - Leviticus Introduction

---

Leviticus, as with all the Torah, is put there to teach we creatures that live in a physical world of time and space some important spiritual principles. And even when we go off track we can return to pure worship....as Israel did time and time again.....by referring back to the original blueprints.

Leviticus is organized in a most logical way. Chapters 1-7 cover the Laws on ritual sacrifice. Chapters 8,9 and 10 speak of the ordination of the Priesthood. Next, chapters 11-16 deal with ritual purity and cleanliness, and finally, chapters 17-27 lay down basic principles and practices for applying holiness to the everyday lives of the Israelite people.

As we read Leviticus, we will see that the goal is a realm in which **wholeness**....that's w-h-o-l-e-ness.....wholeness as in complete and uncompromised..... along with order and perfection, is what represents the ideal condition of Israel. In the negative, the goal is a realm whereby undesired mixture...that is, where the clean and the unclean, the holy and unholy, are not supposed to come into contact with each other..... and it's where flaws and imperfections, which exist in the natural world, are outlawed from God's servants and sanctuary.

From the priestly point of view.....which is the lens through which Leviticus is presented to us.....this book is concerned primarily with maintaining a state of perfect union between Israel and Yehoveh. So, Leviticus addresses the various threats to Israel's life with God. A complex matrix of ordinances, which we typically call laws, are provided to facilitate purification and reconciliation when impurity and sin is encountered. These same ordinances are also there to establish a code of behavior according to God's Justice System, and to protect the priests, the land, the people, and God's earthly dwelling place from the pollution caused by that, if left unchecked, would thereby cause separation from God.

You will learn more about who God is, what sin is, the many faceted nature of atonement and redemption, and the awful price that is needed to turn the Lord away from His wrath towards us than any other book of the Bible.

We'll continue next week on our preparation to study the book of Torah that Jewish children are taught before any other: Leviticus.