

PART I  
INTRODUCTORY NOTES



## Overview of Leviticus

Amid the vast, severe wilderness landscape of the Sinai region, in sun-scorched sorrow and disappointment over so recent a national sin – the creation and worship of an idol of smelted jewelry – life abruptly changes. With a mere conjunction, subject, and action, “And the Lord called,” God interrupts time and space, regret and reason, futility and hope. The Lord God redirects the worshipping impulse in Israel to the proper object and in the acceptable way. The existential questions of humanity are vaporized at the appearance of the audible word of the living God: “And the Lord called Moses and spoke to Him.” Thus, the third book of Moses begins with a call. As the Lord called Moses to service from the mysterious burning bush, He now calls His servant from the incalculable and inexpressible glory (the “weight”) of His presence in the tabernacle. Human life will never be the same. Something new is afoot. With this new call to Moses everything changes.

*The Lord summoned Moses.* The text literally reads, “And he called to Moses.” It connects with Exod 40:35, “And Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud rested on it and the presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.” Indeed, because Moses could not enter the Tent, which at its erection was filled with the Lord’s presence (*kābôd*), the Lord had to speak from the Tent while Moses stood outside in the Tabernacle court.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Jacob Milgrom (2008), *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press), 134.

God is with man. Nothing can be more magnificent or instructive than to know that Leviticus is the Word of God spoken by God to a man, Moses, from the place of God's temporary dwelling on earth. The idea would be absurd if it were not so. The first line of Leviticus conditions every other line that is written: This is a word from another world come down to ours.

Leviticus is at once narrative, historical, and didactic. Leviticus is a narrative as the document is a veritable transcript of the audible voice of Almighty God giving commands to His spokesman, Moses. The Word of God in these twenty-seven chapters is presented in historical terms as the narrative occurs and "the tent of meeting" becomes the holy point of contact between God and Israel, and through Israel, God and Man. Historically, the narrative forms a new way of relating to God after the golden calf incident.

Leviticus is also an essential book in discerning the presence of a divine framework. For here in Leviticus, we observe the tenets of covenant theology that binds the sixty-six books of the holy Bible as one. Therefore, the third book of Moses is crucial didactic material for understanding the rest of Holy Scripture. The trail of redemptive history must pass from the *protoevangelium* in Genesis 3:15, to the Abrahamic covenant, and arrive at Leviticus. Advancement in the unfolding of God's redemptive plan is made possible by Leviticus. There is a teleological plan at work in the post-Edenic world that has been hinted at but not yet fully codified. Paradise Lost will become Paradise Regained. The work undertaken is not by the children of those who fell but is the consequence of the gracious and glorious resolve of the Creator. The fundamental concept of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of Man is here expounded in repeated, detailed statutes and cases. Holiness is as alien

a concept to this fallen world as the Trinity. Yet God is holy, and we are to be holy. One commentator wrote: "God's intrinsic holiness may be underscored by the fact that in 19:2 God's holiness is expressed in a nominal sentence whereas Israel's holiness must be expressed by a verbal sentence. It is something Israel *must* or *will be* but that God is."<sup>2</sup> That's it. The holiness of God transcends all earthly knowledge and comparisons.<sup>3</sup> Man, and the world given to him to steward, are contaminated by sin. There is an irreconcilable difference between God and Man. Leviticus is the revelation of God's plan to breach that chasm.

Moreover, a divinely determined penal code is revealed in unequivocal terms. God is offended by the sin of the pinnacle of His creation, humankind, and His holiness demands a holiness of nature and deed in order to approach Him. The necessary deeds are made of (active) holiness of life and (passive) punishment for sin. So, we learn that the terms of such justification require righteousness without corruption and atonement with blood by a blameless creature (according to the exact terms of presentation). The matter is not up for debate. One must follow God's plan to know God's salvation or present his own righteousness and assume the invariable punishment. As a faithful Israelite placed his hand on the head of the scapegoat, following the carefully delineated precepts for atonement, man received God's plan of salvation by repentance from other supposed ways of knowing and experiencing Him (i.e., an idol of one's own

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2. Brent A. Strawn (2001), "Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A." In *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, Volume One*, 115-16. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

3. See the classic work on the concept: R. Otto and J. W. Harvey (1924), *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (Oxford University Press, H. Milford).

making). He, also, exercised trust, viz., faith, in God's plan of salvation, all of which is set forth in Leviticus.

The Antetype depicted in Leviticus directs Israel and the world to the Messiah, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who meets every point of the Levitical statutes. Jesus meets the Levitical demands for the offering, the priesthood, and the manner of sacrifice. The surprise of the Covenant of Grace is that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity God becomes the ultimate and terminal sacrificial creature. "The Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world" has been a familiar Advent announcement to believers the world over for two millennia. The Baptizer's words are announced in thoroughly Levitical concepts. Yet, the phrase carries the New Covenant concept that the Son of God will be the sacrifice for sins. Thus, the divinely determined covenantal scheme is understood by recognizing the terms of the Covenant demonstrated in Leviticus. Historically, Leviticus begins at the foot of Sinai not long after the apostasy in the wilderness: "Sinai and its law, a few weeks before, with the dark apostasy in the matter of the golden calf, had lately taught them the necessity of reconciliation and made their conscience thirst for that living water."<sup>4</sup> "The date of these laws is probably a few days after the tabernacle had been set up. They are given not from Sinai, though at its foot (see 27:34); but from over the mercy seat, from between the cherubim, where the glory had so lately found a resting-place."<sup>5</sup>

## The Title of Leviticus

The Hebrew title of the book of Leviticus is taken from the first verse. "Now the LORD called to Moses and spoke

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4. Andrew A. Bonar (1851), *A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus, Expository and Practical* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers), 18.

5. Bonar, 18.

to him” (NKJV). The Jewish convention for naming biblical books after their opening word makes the Hebrew name for Leviticus (*wayyiqra'*, “and He called”). The English title, Leviticus, derives from the Greek term ΛΕΥΙΤΙΚΟΝ (LEUITIKON) which is from the Latin *Liber Leviticus* (Book of Levites). Though the book does not focus on the Levites, Christian tradition holds that the Levitical priests were the rightful recipients of the material (Heb. 7:11).<sup>6</sup>

Whether one prefers the Hebrew name or the early Christian name of the book, Leviticus is most certainly a book about God’s call to holiness, and of the Levitical institution and maintenance of those divinely articulated rituals that speak of the holiness of God, the great chasm between a holy God and sinful man, and the need to overcome that chasm, not by works, but by God’s gracious provision. For it is not the keeping of the rituals, but faith in God expressed in the rituals that is required. Salvation from eternal punishment can only come through a transfer of trust from self or any other thing to the object of faith, the free offer of life in God, fully revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, the resurrected and reigning Lord of all. Rather than seeing Israel bending to pagan cultural religious norms in the Ancient Near East, we see a loving God condescending to His people to provide a way to overcome the division between God and man by an ostensible means they could comprehend. This is very similar to the other acts of God in the wilderness such as the bronze serpent on a pole that brought healing from snakebites or the command to Moses to speak to the rock. In all these cases, faith lays hold of the gift offered by God. Therefore, the means of salvation in Leviticus is no different than the means of salvation commanded by Paul in Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through

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6. *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, Logos Bible Software, cited December 14, 2022.

faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9, NKJV).

## Authorship and Time

Leviticus was written by Moses, having responded to God’s call. This is evident not only by the phrase “God called to Moses” – a phrase that serves as binding material for the entire work – but by the testimony of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. There is no hesitancy whatsoever with Jesus ascribing the first five books of the Bible to Moses. Therefore, we need no further evidence to dismiss the documentary hypothesis of Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918). The critical theory, the more modern literary form, and similar approaches that appear to be based upon evolutionary commitments in no way diminish the plain truth and testimony of the Scriptures about itself.

Leviticus begins to unfold immediately after the dedication of the tabernacle, the giving of the Ten Commandments, and the worship of the golden calf. The setting for the book is at the foot of Sinai. Indeed, the setting and the antecedent events, the giving of the law, and Aaron’s sin in leading the people in worship of the golden calf, are integral to the justification for the book of Leviticus. We must agree with Dr. John Currid, who wrote: “No other book in the Old Testament claims it is divine revelation as frequently as Leviticus. At least thirty-eight times in twenty-seven chapters we see the expression, ‘And Yahweh spoke to Moses ...’”<sup>7</sup> In our agreement with evangelical scholarship, we must depart from any notions of the *documentary hypothesis*.<sup>8</sup>

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7. John D. Currid (2004), *A Study Commentary on Leviticus*, EP Study Commentary (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press), 22.

8. See the vigorous and impeccable scholarship of Laird Harris in R. L. Harris (2008), *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Scriptures* (Wipf & Stock Publishers). The author studied Old Testament under Dr. Harris.



A column of Humanist-Enlightenment “critical” scholars, mostly German, developed theories upon theories of “historicism” regarding Old Testament authorship.<sup>9</sup> Differentiating between the “Word of God” and what English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1598–1679) called “holy history” in *Leviathan* (while he was in exile in Paris as Cromwell and Milton held forth in the Republic of England which he had opposed), the intellectual musings of Hobbes remained on the Continent.<sup>10</sup> These ideas took root in Paris and spread to the Germanic regions. The historicism movement of interpretation (and, later, form or literary criticism, as in Hermann Gunkel [1862–1932] and his focus on Genesis and the Psalms as legend) viewed the Pentateuch as redacted material by several prejudicial schools of rabbinical and priestly influence.<sup>11</sup>

There were, of course, disagreements within the camps of the documentary hypothesis adherents. For example,

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9. See Thomas Albert Howard (2006), *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge University Press).

10. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668* (Hackett Publishing, 1994). See, also, Patricia Springborg (2007), *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan* (Cambridge University Press); Jürgen Overhoff, “The Theology of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 51, no. 3 (July 2000): 527-55, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046900005157>. See, also, Nathaniel H. Henry, “Milton and Hobbes: Mortalism and the Intermediate State,” *Studies in Philology* 48, UNC Press, no. 2 (1951): 234-49.

11. B. Halpern (2010), *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (Pennsylvania State University Press). On Burckhardt and De Witte, see T. A. Howard (2006), *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge University Press). Although the son of a Protestant minister, Jacob Burckhardt rejected the Christian faith. His contributions as a classicist and cultural historian remain peerless. It was in the pursuit of these historical models, however, that he developed and applied critical hypotheses to the Bible. His prejudices against Christianity appear, his brilliance notwithstanding. See J. Burckhardt (1943), *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History*; ed. by James Hastings Nichols (Random); J. Burckhardt (1963), *History of Greek Culture* (Dover Publications); J. Burckhardt and S. G. C. Middlemore (1892), *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Swan Sonnenschein).

Johann Karl Wilhelm Vatke (1806-1882) applied “principles of Hegelian philosophy [and], took the position that religions move from a primitive to a more advanced form over time.”<sup>12</sup> After considering Vatke’s imposition of his historiographic model on to the Old Testament one might also suggest that critical theory moves in the opposing direction. We agree with Colin Smith: “Any student of literature knows that a single author can adopt many different styles according to the needs of the work at hand. To use style, then, as a basis for distinguishing between multiple authors is, at best, a dangerous exercise, prone to error.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the documentary hypothesis remains despite persistent counterclaims from the very fields its adherents claim, viz., archeology, history, and literature. It is, thus, considered for its widespread influence, and rejected on the ground of its own proposals.

It is impossible to move away from the Mosaic authorship of Leviticus when we consider what the text says of itself: “These are the commandments which the LORD commanded Moses for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai” (27:34, NKJV); cf. 7:38; 25:1; 26:46). “Holy history” (Hobbes) and the “Word of God” are not mutually exclusive.

From two biblical references – Exodus 12:40 reveals that 430 years passed from Joseph entering Egypt to the Exodus; and 1 Kings 6:1, which states that Solomon began building the Temple 480 years after the Exodus – we may date Leviticus at around 1445 B.C.

We agree with Dr. Currid, “. . . there is no evidence proving that the material in the book is later than the time of Moses.”<sup>14</sup> The critical interpretive school must rely

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12. Colin Smith (2002), “A Critical Assessment of the Graf-Wellhausen Documentary Hypothesis,” *ColinSmith.Com (Unpublished Essay)*, [www.colindsmith.com/papers/JEDP.pdf](http://www.colindsmith.com/papers/JEDP.pdf).

13. Smith, 34.

14. Currid, *Leviticus*, 22.

on theory. Let us depend on the testimony of Scripture itself. Without apology or equivocation, we assert: Let the reader be confident that Moses wrote Leviticus in the fifteenth century before Christ. From the wilderness to the caves of Qumran to a nightstand in a five-star hotel in New York, Leviticus remains a Word from another World available to people of all kinds in all times and in all places.<sup>15</sup> This is the Word of the living God.

## Theology of Leviticus

There are at least four significant theological features of Leviticus. Firstly, Leviticus is about the holiness of God. Secondly, Leviticus is uncompromising in its assessment of human sin. Thirdly, Leviticus is about God's plan of salvation. Fourthly, Leviticus is about the call to holiness through God's gracious provision. The theology in Leviticus is most notably expressed in clear yet profound statements: "I am holy. You therefore must be holy." Yet, theology, knowledge about God, is communicated by sign and symbol, by activity in the lives of Israel and their neighbors, and His revelation about Himself and humanity. The theology operates within the larger framework of divine arrangements, i.e., implied covenants, which are expressions of the problem (of sin and its effect on the relationship between Israel and God), as well as divine remedy. It is impossible to grapple with the several concerns of Leviticus without, firstly, coming to terms with the essential frame of the book: God is holy. Man is a sinner. What does that mean? What are its implications? How does one respond?

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15. Ken M. Penner (2016), *The Lexham Dead Sea Scrolls Hebrew-English Interlinear Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press).

PART 2  
TEXT AND COMMENTARY



## Section I

### **Called to Worship (Leviticus 1–7)**

The Lord opens His discourse with Moses by addressing how to deal with sin. Almighty God paints an extraordinary portrait of sinful Man, male and female, in the presence of a holy God. The offerings are presented and described for the laity and priests. God's emphasis on His holiness and the incomprehensible chasm that exists because of two natures in conflict – holiness and sin – require a careful protocol of selection, preparation, and administration of the sacrificial victims. Thus, the priesthood is addressed separately. The divinely designed protocol had to be followed without the slightest deviation. Otherwise, the offering is tainted with human intentions, contributions, or critiques. Such cannot be in a system that anticipates a perfect Messiah, a Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. Theological systems that feature human contributions to God's plan of salvation are biblically erroneous and practically dangerous.

#### **The Five Offerings: Divine Guidance to The Laity (1:1-6:7)**

##### **The Burnt Offering (1:1-17)**

The first chapter of Leviticus is, in a sense, the gospel in miniature. God commands Moses to guide the people toward the way for relating to God though they are sinners. The only way is through God's revealed Word.

The greater teaching of the Bible will demonstrate that the blood of bulls and sheep and turtledoves are in themselves shadows and types of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. God Himself accomplished the priestly preparation of the sacrifices through the High Priest, our Lord Jesus Christ. The sweet offering that comes to God is not the fragrant vapors from the charred beast but the precious life without blemish of His only begotten Son. In this, we must remember that Jesus Christ is our all in all. No fulfilment of the Levitical persons, sacrifices, or process is attributed to any other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

As one approaches the text, we remember, first and foremost, that the offerings were doxological in nature. Here, we note John Fesko's comment, "In other words, the people's offering was an act of worship."<sup>1</sup> The nature is doxological, and yet *the context* of the offering speaks to both corporate Israel, the covenantal community, and to the individual families and persons in that community. Thus, there is a highly personal and relational aspect of the sacrifice that cannot be overstated. In a post-agrarian Western culture, we have become increasingly separated from beasts of burden, farm animals, and the land. Nevertheless, we become necessarily attuned to how essential such things are during times of catastrophe. Unless one has grown up on a farm one cannot understand the relationship between, say, a lamb and a child, a cow and the lady of the house, or a favorite ox that pulls the gentleman-farmer's plow each day. The force of all of this is that the plan of salvation is both corporate and individual.

And the true worship of God is personally costly. King David said, "I cannot sacrifice to the LORD my God

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1. J. V. Fesko (2012), *Christ and the Desert Tabernacle* (Darlington, England: EP Books), 14.

burnt offerings that have cost me nothing” (2 Sam. 24:24). Thus, worship is also a costly offering of individuals, their families, and their families in community with other families (viz., the local fellowship of saints to the Church catholic). The necessity for each of us is to come before the Lord with the offering or offerings prescribed by God: *life without blemish and lifeblood given for sin*. The question is whether you will give your life or the life of one you love (and, of course, you must bring only a life without blemish, without sin), or if God will provide the life. This is a distinguishing mark that separates Judeo-Christianity from the world’s religions. We have heard it said, “In false religion, a god requires *your* son. In biblical faith, God gives *His* Son.” Thus, as one places one’s hand upon the beast one identifies with the sacrifice. Jesus Christ died for the world of men. That is, He died for a race of individuals who repent and turn to Him. There is no group salvation. Individuals within Israel identified their sin with the animal. A king may come forward to receive the Lord Jesus Christ, and in doing so, he is such an example and becomes a teacher and even an evangelist for his people. However, each of his subjects must become a subject of the Lord Jesus Christ personally. There can be no community salvation. There is only individual salvation within the community. Any other teaching is erroneous. Harrison’s insight on the voluntary nature of the sacrifice characterizes a significant component in the burnt offering: “The offerings described are voluntary and personal in nature, and the literary form matches the comparative simplicity of the occasion. Group sacrifices do not seem to be entertained here.”<sup>2</sup>

The types of offerings and the classification of sacrifices is God’s gracious condescension to our fallen condition.

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2. R. K. Harrison (1980), *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 45.



When Christ was born, He received the adoration of shepherds as well as nobility, of angels in heaven and of men. This is the beauty that is present in Leviticus. God coming to His creatures and providing a way of salvation for us. Thus, the burnt offering is the first of the five offerings, “a food offering with the pleasing aroma to the LORD.”

A primary expository concern in the text, established in chapter 1, then assumed and demonstrated throughout the rest of the book, is the divine regulation of worship. Israel was not only to follow the explicit commands of God concerning worship, but they were to refrain from those things not commanded. In this principle the regulative principle of worship in the Reformed churches finds its biblical ground. Indeed, the judgment of Aaron’s sons in chapter 10 is an example of divine wrath against extra-biblical sacrificial means, i.e., liturgical practices beyond the scope of God’s commands. Sinful man must approach God in God’s way alone. We cannot add to or subtract from the commandments of God. Neither should we presume upon God (e.g., “It is not written, but surely God won’t mind if ...”). Again, the entirety of the law is laser-focused on the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. There is no other name under heaven, whereby we may be saved, but through Jesus Christ. We cannot add to the finished work of Jesus Christ. We dare not imagine a better way than the revealed plan of God. If we could somehow understand the full meaning of the Son of God nailed on a cross from timber that He had made, being crucified and jeered by human beings He had made and loved, and His cries unanswered by the Father, we could not stand the shame. For He was there for you and me.