

Tips for Reading Leviticus

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The book of Leviticus is shaping and nourishing the ancient people of God as a ‘holy people’—this phrase occurs repeatedly in this book. ‘Holy’ means to be set apart for something. Consider that God is holy: God is set apart from humanity and from the creation as the only one who (ultimately) creates, provides for, maintains, and restores everything that God has created. Similarly, Yahweh’s people are to be holy—set apart—to God. To be holy in Leviticus means to be marked out by a particular way of life and by particular relationships: the social law nourishes God’s people to be a fellowship of care that prioritizes the weakest in the community. The purity laws mark the people out as those who pay utmost attention to Yahweh’s way, in every aspect of their lives. The sacrificial system marks Israel out as those who worship Yahweh with devotion and reverence, in a way that fully embodied, sensory, communal, visceral, and costly.



Laws for offerings: Leviticus 1-7

In Leviticus, sacrificial blood cleansed impurity and sanctified (made holy) both people and objects. Sacrifice, in this book, set apart the people of Yahweh as a people belonging to God: these rituals enacted, in rhythmic time with the agricultural seasons, the people’s relationships to God; this was a relationship of covenant and a fellowship of love. The various offerings had different functions. “Using a little imagination every reader of the OT soon realizes that these ancient sacrifices were very moving occasions. They make modern church services seem tame and dull by comparison. The ancient worshipper did not just listen to the minister and sing a few hymns. S/he was actively involved in the worship. S/he had to choose an unblemished animal from the flock, bring it to the sanctuary, kill it and dismember it with his/her own hands, then watch it go up in smoke before his/her very eyes. S/he was convinced that something very significant was achieved through these acts and

knew that his relationship with God was profoundly affected by this sacrifice.”¹

Purity laws, Leviticus 11-15

In every culture, there is a sense of what is ‘dirty’ and what is ‘clean’. And, though it seems to us that our own culture’s understanding of ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ is truly real, in fact, what is clean and dirty is cultural determined—it is different for every culture! Cultural anthropologists tell us that these ideas of ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ are not isolated concepts in a culture. Rather, they symbolise important values that are shared within a culture. Practices of purity mirror other practices and identities that are of high importance. You might say that purity practices are a rehearsal in a regular aspect of life for something very important that we value. This is how *Israel’s* purity laws worked, too. By paying careful attention to mundane things such as the kind of food that they ate and bodily sores, Israel was rehearsing—in an embodied way—for a life that was wholly dedicated to Yahweh.

Yet, why these particular practices? Why was *this* food clean and *that* food unclean? Sadly, the cultural peculiarities and symbols that produced these very specific laws are now lost to us. The central message of these purity laws for us is that God, in love, invites us to surrender every aspect of our lives and our communal life to God.

By the time of Jesus, these same regulations had become highly politicized, and were wielded by Israel’s cultural and religious elite to maintain their status at the centre of Israel’s purity map. Jesus pulls inside-out the

accepted purity map of persons, which had privileged the religious elite and denigrated the neediest of “outsiders.” Those persons whom first century Judaism shunned, Jesus received as his own kindred. Israel’s food laws had for generations defined the boundary of the people of God. But in the gospel of Mark, Jesus declares all foods to be clean (Mark 7:19), and teaches that it is the things that come *out of* the mouth and heart that make a person unclean. By this, Jesus is signifying, in the terms of first century Judaism, that God may be approached by any person, and seeks covenant and kinship with all.

Law code, Leviticus 17-25

Leviticus 17-25 is a collection of laws, an ancient text type that is commonly known as a ‘law code’. Within the law code, the holiness of Yahweh’s people also concerns ethics concerning sexual relations. Leviticus 18 contains various prohibitions regarding sexual relationships, focusing on the prohibition of incest (Lev 18:6-18) and upon the practices of the surrounding people groups (Lev 18:1-5, 21, 24-30).

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, in particular, needs some explanation. These verses are traditionally translated in English bibles as: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman.” Many Christian see these two passages as applying to same-sex sexual relationships. However, recent scholarship has shown that the sense of the passage is not, “as with a woman,” but, “in the domain of a woman.” In this way the law states: “you shall not lie with a male who is in the domain of a women.” In other words, a male may not lie with a man who belongs to a woman. Married males are off-limits for sexual activity with other males by virtue of a relationship that they have with a particular

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¹ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 55.

woman. The goal behind the text is probably family and community stability. So, these verses are not addressing same-sex sexual activity in general. Understanding these two verses correctly is particularly significant in light that the consequence of transgressing this law, in the second text, is stoning.

The ‘social law’ of Leviticus—the law that concerns social and economic relationships—tilts heavily on the side of the poorest in the land. There is nothing like this law code for its compassion and solidarity with the poor in all of the contemporary ancient Near Eastern law codes, many of which we have to read (the law codes of Exodus and Deuteronomy are similarly tilted heavily toward the most vulnerable). Leviticus 19:9-18 states:

⁹When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

¹¹You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹²And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD.

¹³You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

¹⁵You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶You shall not go around as a slanderer among

your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

¹⁷You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

(Leviticus 19:9-18)

It is from Leviticus that Jesus’ command, “love your neighbor as yourself” comes (Matt 22:39). When Jesus echoed Leviticus in this way, we know from his own life that by ‘neighbor’ Jesus was referring especially to the most vulnerable and marginalized people. Jesus didn’t invent this radical way of life, for Leviticus has the same concern! Jesus was living as Israel was always supposed to be. For, Leviticus also states:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien.

³⁴The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34)

Leviticus’ social vision is a rich invitation to contemporary Western nations in their response to vulnerable populations and to economic inequity. For example, the law cited above should stir contemporary societies to offer a warm welcome for the 65 million people who have been forcibly displaced globally. ✨