

Understanding The Old Testament Week 9: Leviticus

Moral Sin vs. Ritual Uncleaness

- The bulk of Leviticus can be thought of as laws pertaining to how the priests are to conduct themselves and how the nation is to conduct themselves when it comes to being ritually clean.
- Ritually clean is the idea that Yahweh is holy, wholly set apart, completely other. Yes, rebellious sin separates us from Him, but so did being ritually impure.
- Many of the laws are seemingly bizarre to us. When you lose blood, you are unclean; when you discharge from your body, you are unclean; when you have mold in your house, you are unclean; and so on. The idea this conveys is how "other" Yahweh really is. He is perfect, and we often fail to understand how perfect He is and how imperfect we are. (Partially because we are incapable without Him revealing it to us.)
- Atonement in these passages is the price paid not to remove rebellious sin but to remove ritual uncleaness from the people.

See Isaiah 6:1-7: Isaiah didn't have any moral sin, but when he saw the glory of the Lord and how holy He is, he cried out in agony because of his uncleaness.

Leviticus 1:4: “to make atonement for him.”

- Atonement (כִּפֹּר - kapper) does not necessarily mean forgiveness of sin. It can in certain circumstances (particularly the atonement given to us by Jesus), but not all. In this instance, atonement means a payment that allows an Israelite to occupy sacred space.

No sacrifice in the Old Testament removes intentional sin. Sin where you knew it was wrong and still committed the sin. Old Testament sacrifice only atoned for unknown or accidental sin (i.e., I lost balance and fell over an object in the tabernacle I wasn't supposed to touch, and I broke it, I'm in a situation and I don't know how to apply the law to a specific circumstance, so I do my best and I find out later I made the wrong application).

Warning: We no longer live in the pre-scientific era. Some of the concepts and beliefs will be very foreign to us. For example, we know that the male doesn't hold the child in their body, which then gets put in the woman's body. Again, the Bible can't be read like a science book; they didn't live in the scientific era we do; 500 years from now, they will look at our scientific beliefs like we were cavemen too. Leviticus can teach us what they thought about certain things and apply them to our lives today. For example, blood loss made someone unclean, regardless of the method, because they recognized that if someone loses too much blood, they die. Therefore, blood was associated with life, and blood loss was associated with death. Because you don't want to bring death into the God of life's dwelling place, it made you ritually unclean until a specific time had passed and a sacrifice (which lost blood in your place) was offered. None of this makes the Bible errant, untrustworthy, or unhelpful in its purpose. The Bible was written for us but not too us.

The Offerings and what they were for:

- **Leviticus 1: Burnt Offering > Fellowship Offering:** To approach God and spend time with Him
 - Burnt offerings were an offering brought to Yahweh to say, "I would like to spend time with You." It is called a burnt offering because it is wholly burnt; none of it is shared with anyone; it goes entirely to the Lord. This practice is very different from the worship of pagan deities. Often pagan cults required food to be brought and left before the deity to "feed" them. The food would rot, or the priests would eat it, but the object was to please their god and ensure they had enough food. Yahweh's worship is different; the burnt offering makes it clear that He doesn't need our food. He does not need providing for; He provides. This...

sacrifice was purely a surrendering of one's goods to announce that you would like to spend a little time near His Presence.

- **Leviticus 2: Grain Offering > Remembrance Offering:** “Thank you for your covenant with us.”
 - Leviticus 2:11: No leaven, no honey. **Leavening agents** like yeast were viewed positively and negatively depending on the context. They didn't understand the science of it, but they knew the leavening changed the properties of something, a bread baked with leaven was very different from bread without leavening. The idea here was to not present something unnatural to Yahweh. **Honey** is excreted from the bee; bodily fluid excretion will make one unclean for sacred space, so you logically would not want to include it in your offering to Yahweh.
 - Leviticus 2:13: Remember the salt. The mandatory inclusion of salt reveals to us the purpose of this offering, the remembrance, and thanksgiving for the covenant Yahweh has made with the Israelite people. Widespread in covenants was the inclusion of salt; the logic was that if one party of a covenant failed to withhold their end of the covenant, the offended party would salt the land of the offending party. It was a symbolic reminder that "I am keeping the covenant."
- **Leviticus 3: Peace Offering > Thanksgiving Offering:** "I am at peace, it is well with me, thank you." Leviticus 3:3 "...peace offering, as a food offering to Yahweh." The idea of this offering, which would have taken place after the burnt offering and possibly the grain offering, was the idea of sharing a meal with Yahweh and the priesthood. This was not an offering to make peace with God but because you are already at peace with Him. The Lord would get the fatty and best portions, and the rest would be prepared for the priests and the one offering the meal. (see Leviticus 19 for more.)
- **Leviticus 4: Sin Offering > Decontamination Offering:**
 - Removes "ritual uncleanness" from an individual should they become aware they unintentionally sinned and became "ritually unclean."
 - The idea of this offering is: “I accidentally broke one of the laws, or I unknowingly broke the law, and now I am unfit for sacred space. Here is my offering to decontaminate my uncleanness.” See Leviticus 4:1-4 > unintentional sin. See notes on Leviticus 16: Day of Atonement.
- **Leviticus 5: Guilt Offering > Restitution/Reparation Offering**
 - 1. Accidental misuse or destruction of tabernacle property; 2. Unknowing breaking of the Lord's commandments; 3. The realization that you have cheated someone in a business deal (again: unknown sin) 4. You could not do something you should have done because of an external influence. (See verse 1)

The wave offering is a symbolic gesture showing the release of something to the Lord and was part of the ritual of the previous offerings.

Leviticus 5:14-7 - Rules and Regulations for offerings and priestly duties.

Leviticus 8 - Ordination of Aaron and his sons and priests. Some of these offerings take place in the ordination.

Leviticus 9 - Aaron performs a Sin (Decontamination) Offering, and the Glory of The Lord appears to him and the people of Israel.

Leviticus 10 - The Death of Aaron's Sons

- Nadab and Abihu die due to not following the Lord's commands and not following the procedure to protect them from Yahweh's holiness.

All the following are likely reasons why Nadab and Abihu died:

1) They offered “unauthorized fire” (Leviticus 10:1). 2) They may have been drunk (Leviticus 10:9). 3) They penetrated too far into the tabernacle (Leviticus 16:1-2).

Nadab and Abihu didn't treat the Lord as Holy (Leviticus 10:3), and such people cannot be in the presence of God ministering before Him. God is a Holy God; it is not something He does. It is something He is, and we must continually seek understanding about His holiness and develop a holy fear of how extraordinary and unexplainable our God is.

Leviticus 11 - Unclean Animals

- We do not know for sure why some animals are clean vs. others. There are multiple options, and different reasons may apply.
- Pigs could be associated with child sacrifice. Archeologists have uncovered Phoenician depictions of a deity receiving a child as a sacrifice in one hand and a pig as a sacrifice in the other. Like other laws in the Torah, some of the sacrifices are likely polemics against other religious practices. However, this is certainly not the reason for every unclean animal. Cows, for example, are offered as sacrifices in pagan cultures but are not unclean animals.
- The most likely reason certain animals are considered unclean is simply due to the cultural views of certain animals at the time. We find much crossover of unclean animals with Israelites and other ancient cultures. The idea was probably, "if it's not good enough for humans, it certainly isn't good enough for the Lord."
- Regardless of why certain animals are unclean, the passage speaks to the Lord deserving only the best we can offer Him.

Leviticus 12 - 15: Childbirth, Leprosy, and Discharges

- Remember that being ritually unclean is not the same as being morally sinful.
- Ritual Purification was done to remind Israelites of how Holy Yahweh was.
- Childbirth is a blessing (Psalm 128:3) and part of God's original plan (Genesis 1). It isn't sinful to have a child, but it is a messy process.
 - The reason for different times of uncleanness has multiple possibilities. The male child was to be circumcised on the 8th day; a shorter unclean time allowed the mother to attend the circumcision without making other people unclean. She would continue being unclean for 33 days (40 days total). The female child made the mother unclean for 80 days.
 - Much ancient literature indicates that this was to protect children, especially females. Witchcraft and sorcery against young children were especially rampant, and the time being "unclean" would have allowed mothers time to stay home with the child without any visitors or distractions. It could be the Lord desiring to protect the female child longer than the male.
- Discharging being unclean is simply for the idea that you are discharging life, whether it be blood or other bodily fluids.

Leviticus 16 - The Day of Atonement

- Leviticus 16:1-2: The High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place only once per year on the day of atonement. If he had tried to enter at any other time and in any other way (as Aaron's sons likely did), he would have died because of the holiness of Yahweh.
 - Remember, the Old Testament sacrificial system has no sacrifices for intentional, known, rebellious sin. Only the Lord can forgive sin.

Hebrews 9:6–7 ESV: ⁶These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, ⁷but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.

• **We have it so much better under the New Covenant, where Jesus shed His blood for the forgiveness of ALL sins.**

- Leviticus 16:8: Two goats, one for Yahweh, one for Azazel. See the sermon entitled "Sending Sin Where It Belongs" for the entire teaching. Two goats were presented to the High Priest on the day of atonement; one goat would be given to the Lord as a sin (decontamination) offering, and the other goat would carry the (unintentional) sin into the wilderness to Azazel (a personal name for a demon). In doing so, the picture was that the tabernacle had been reset in its cleanness, and its uncleanness was sent out to the desert and Azazel, where it belongs. Sin doesn't belong in the tabernacle. While in the OT, this only served as a removal of unintentional sin from the people of Israel, when Jesus came, He played the role of both goats and superseded them. He took our sin from us and separated it as far as the east is from the west at the same time, made us holy.
- The Day of Atonement should be thought of as a reset switch or a restart button. Like how your phone or computer needs to be restarted when it starts acting up, the Day of Atonement was like a reset switch for the tabernacle; everything gets made holy again because everything is purified in blood. It is no accident that Jesus died on the Day of Atonement, thus resetting the world; no longer was humanity doomed to die in their sin; the Savior had come to remove our sins and make us clean. He has filled us with His Spirit and made us sacred space, His holy temple.

Leviticus 17 - Animals that are killed and not brought to the Lord.

- The sacrifice of any animals outside of the tabernacle is strictly forbidden. All sacrifices were to take place in the tabernacle under the supervision of the priesthood. The seriousness of this offense can be seen in how the Lord describes what this person would have done: blood guiltiness.
- This was done primarily to ensure Israel sacrifices to Yahweh and no other gods. Leviticus 17:7 speaks of Israelites sacrificing to goat demons; At the same time, not many details are given, but the message is the same: this cannot continue, worship Yahweh alone, He loves you, He will provide for you, He alone is God over all creation.
- Leviticus 17:10: Ingesting the blood of animals was strictly forbidden for the reasons stated before. Blood was a substance of life. Many pagan cultures used blood in their rituals and demonic worship. Israel's disallowance to eat blood and discharge of blood, making them unclean, is a unique law in Israel's religion that sets them apart from the pagan cultures around them.

Leviticus 18 - Sexual Relations

- This entire passage is about protecting the family unit, how the family unit could procreate, and what is detestable in the sight of the Lord regarding sexual conduct.
- The family has been and always will be a priority for Yahweh. We are His earthly family. The heavenly host is spoken of in family terms (i.e., sons of God). The creation of a family is one of the first commands written in the Bible (Genesis 1:28; 2:24). In ancient times; the family was how you survived and held your land. Sons would work the family trade, get married, procreate, and carry on the family's name; women would marry other families and carry on their family's name. God sets some of His guidelines for what is acceptable in this area.

- Outside of the regulations of who could become your wife are the following regulations: 1) No children sacrifice. 2) No homosexuality. 3) No bestiality. These three regulations have the same thing in common they are all a way of not being able to have offspring, something that is very important to the Lord and His original design for marriage.
- Some regulations also concern polemics against pagan cult practices: Leviticus 18:19-28.
- These restrictions are unique as they are associated with making the person(s) engaged in this sin unclean and the land, Leviticus 18:24-28. This sin can affect sacred space (Israel would be considered sacred space once they inherited the promised land). These great sins are attested to as a reason God would eventually exile Israel and Judah: Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5, 32:35.
 - It is this passage that was running through Paul's mind when he wrote 1 Cor 6:18b.

Leviticus 19:1-8 - A Call to Holiness. A Call to Love Others. A Call to Remain Pure.

- The entire Bible is a story of how a Holy, inconceivable, un-understandable God created us to be with us. How His creation rebelled, and the great lengths He went through to be with His creation.
- The laws and regulations may seem strict, and the punishments may seem severe, but this was the cost of Yahweh dwelling with His people. It's not that He wanted people to die. He's not bloodthirsty, and He doesn't hate people. Those who try and twist the narrative to say these things don't understand (and usually don't want to) what is truly going on. Yahweh is perfect; He is holy; He is so far above it all. Sin cannot be around Him. The laws are there for Israel to police itself so that Yahweh can continue to dwell with them. He will not be associated with evil and unrighteousness. Leviticus 19:2 is the plea behind every law and disciplinary command. "Be holy as I am holy." It is the only way for us to be with Him! This command is not "don't have fun, be boring." This command is "come and be with me."
- It is fitting that what follows this is the regulations of how to partake in the Peace Offering (the one where the person bringing the sacrifice could have a meal with God). He wants to be with His people, and He wants it more than anything. Jesus uses similar language: Revelation 3:14-22.
- Leviticus 19:9-18: Living a life representing Yahweh to others (loving others as yourself).

Sacred Space Article:

Faithlife Study Bible Holiness and Sacred Space in Israelite Religion

People in ancient Israel considered places of encounter with God to be holy. Such places were sacred space—geographical space set aside only for the presence of Yahweh, or for those whom Yahweh sanctified in order to occupy it (e.g., priests). The world of the divine intersected with the world of people in such places. Religious experts (e.g., priests) served as intermediaries between God and humanity and were responsible for maintaining the sanctity of sacred space.

Since the temple was the abode of God, it served as the primary location of sacred space. God, moreover, owned the temple, and it served as a barrier between Him and the profane—common objects, people, and locations. The temple thus occupied the center of Israelite beliefs about divine presence, ownership, and sanctity.

Since, in theory, every place Yahweh dwells is His abode, the entirety of creation also serves as His temple. God, who is distinct from His creation, nevertheless enters it, making it His abode. Since doing so was a sovereign decision, God asserts His ownership of the space.

In the New Testament, Paul refers to both individual believers and the corporate body of believers as the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19–20). Believers must therefore keep themselves pure—their bodies are sacred space owned by God, who inhabits them via His indwelling Spirit (John 14:17; Rom 8:9, 11; 2 Tim 1:14).

Recommended Resources For Further Research:

The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus; Baruch A. Levine