

LEVITICUS – Laws and sacrifices

In earlier times the firstborn son probably executed the role of **priest** for his family. Now, out of the 12 Tribes (clans), men of the tribe of Levi were commissioned to act as priests on behalf of the nation. The duty of a priest was three-fold. He had to teach the laws and commandments of God. He had to judge criminals. And it was his duty to help erring Israelites find forgiveness through repentance and sacrifice. As this was a full-time occupation, the Law of Moses (to be precise, the Law given through Moses) had to provide them with income. This was provided by a 10% tax (**tithe**) on the income of the other tribes, plus an entitlement to a share of the sacrifices they helped to offer (see Numbers 18, Deuteronomy 12 and 14 and Leviticus 6 v 16-18, 7 v 34).

Animal **sacrifice** sounds repulsive to modern ears. However, harsh as it may seem, from Eden onwards the God of the Bible always required someone who had committed a serious sin to offer to Him a lamb, goat or bull to put things right. To make sense of this rule we need to remember that the animals had to be physically free from blemish (this is emphasized in the early chapters of Leviticus). This was to make them symbols of Jesus, who was to be entirely free from sin. Jesus was, says John the Baptist, ‘the Lamb of God, that takes away the sin of the world’. Death is the penalty for sin. When Jesus volunteered to die, he made himself one with us, sharing a death he did not deserve, so that by rising again to immortality on the third day he could take away the sins of those who seek forgiveness from God. The offerer in Old Testament times placed his hands on the head of the lamb before it was sacrificed. In the same way we can make ourselves one with the sinless Jesus, by declaring our faith in him.

Another important point about animal sacrifices is that most animals were eaten after they were offered, either by the priest who offered them on the altar, or by the worshipper and his family. An exception is the Burnt Offering, but even in this case the priest was entitled to the leather hide.

Sacrifices were only to be made on the altar in the Tabernacle (later in the more permanent Temple). The altar was ceremonially purified and could not be touched except by a consecrated priest. It represented the point of contact between man and God, a symbolic table where a holy God ate a meal with man.

Skim through the early chapters of Leviticus. At first the array of different types of sacrifice seems bewildering. It needs a key. The rationale is that

people in positions of responsibility are penalised more heavily than members of the public. Thus if an ordinary citizen is obliged to offer a female lamb for his sin, a prince or tribal head would need to provide a much more expensive male ram. This is a principle we observe today – Members of Parliament in England, for example, are hounded out of office for sexual misdemeanours that would be overlooked in ordinary citizens, because they are expected to set a good example. The ultimate disgrace would be for a *priest* to commit an offence, because he knows the law inside out and is supposed to teach it. So a priest had to offer a bull, the most expensive offering. At the bottom end of the scale, an Israelite who was poor and could not even afford a female lamb was permitted to offer pigeons instead (Jesus’ mother Mary chose this option in Luke 2 v 24). Even an offering

of flour made into cakes or bread would suffice in extreme circumstances.

In Leviticus chapters 1 to 6 v 7 we find the three principal types of sacrifice – the Burnt Offering, the Sin Offering and the Trespass Offering. The rest of chapter 6 and chapter 7 explain the disposal of the sacrifices – who took home which parts of the animal. Consistently, no human being was allowed to eat blood, because it represented the life of the animal, which belongs to God. It had to be poured out or sprinkled. Fat, too, was forbidden, as it represented the rich energy we should devote to God. It was always burnt on the altar.

The **Burnt Offering** was usually offered as a thanksgiving to God for His help, perhaps in answer to a prayer. After the skin had been removed and the insides washed clean, it was burnt to ashes on the holy altar.

The **Sin Offering** was needed when an Israelite had broken one of the laws of God, and sought forgiveness. The offerer had to lay his hands on the head of the animal, to associate himself with it, and then slay it himself. After this the priest took home the right shoulder, and the rest was burnt on the altar.

The **Trespass Offering** represents the case where the sinner had infringed the rights of another. In this situation he had to make things good through some form of reparation. It could be he had upset God Himself, for example if he had eaten something set aside for the sanctified priests. Or maybe he had cheated or stolen from his neighbour, and taken something that belonged to someone else. In this case, when his conscience smote him, he had to put things right with the one he had offended by replacing the stolen item together with a surcharge of 20%. After that he had to offer the Trespass Offering on the altar, to put things right with God. This

approach drove home the lesson that crime was not just an offence against society. It was a failure to live up to the high standards of honesty and truth demanded by God, who never lies or oppresses His subjects. It was an acknowledgement that God sees our actions, and judges us.

Leviticus chapters 8 to 10 describe the erection and consecration of the new Tabernacle. This would give great satisfaction to those who had contributed towards it. This was followed by the preparation of Aaron, head of the Levite tribe, and his sons, for their life's work as priests. Sadly, the great day of the opening ceremony ended in tragedy. Aaron's two oldest boys (there is a hint they had had too much to drink) tried to invade the Tabernacle when it was full of the bright glory of the Lord, and were struck dead. It was a grave warning that we must approach God with reverence, and only by the rules He has laid down.

The next five chapters are devoted to rules about what foods should be avoided, and about the treatment of contagious disease. These regulations were in part to promote health – eating pork or carrion, for example, is dangerous in the hot climate of the Middle East. The rules for quarantine of a person suspected of leprosy or dysentery reduced the risk of infection being passed on to others. In this respect the Law of Moses was centuries ahead of its time. But there was also a teaching value to these commands. The nations round about Israel were morally unclean. The believing Jew must keep himself separate from spiritual taint by avoiding close association with them, for example in marriage. Leprosy, another topic covered in this section of Leviticus, is an incurable disease, spiralling slowly downwards to death. It is a vivid symbol for sin. Sin infects us all, from birth, and brings us all to the grave. That is why Jesus deliberately healed lepers, both Israelite and

Gentile (non-Jewish), to show he had the power to take away sin.

Leviticus chapter 16 defines the events of the **Day of Atonement**, a solemn day in October when the whole nation fasted and prayed together, and a special two-goat sacrifice was offered to cover the accumulated unforgiven sins of the people. One goat was killed and the other sent away into the wilderness. Symbolically they were one and the same animal. Sharing their fate in this way, they portrayed powerfully Jesus' coming victory over sin and the tomb. He would die to take away our sins, but then rise to a new and glorious life.

There follows a run of chapters with many rulings that cover all aspects of family and social life. Amazingly, the one commandment Jesus picks out from this huge list is a tiny verse in Leviticus 19 v 18. *'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'*, he said, is the second most important commandment in the whole law. If we devote the same care and concern upon those we meet which we like to bestow on ourselves, we will never steal from them, or seduce their spouse, or even bear them a grudge. As James says in his New Testament letter, this one verse sums up everything. Ironically, seen in this light, we are all left as hardened lawbreakers!

One fascinating aspect of the Law of Moses relates to the inheritance of land. When the people reached the Promised Land, Moses said, God would give every family its own piece of land, marked out by boundary stones. This would provide food and clothing for their dependants. It would give them corn for bread, and cows and sheep for meat, milk, cheese, wool and leather. Sometimes, through unavoidable hardship, the family might face large debts and need to sell their inheritance for cash. In this situation, Leviticus 25 v 10 insists that every fiftieth year, the **Year of Jubilee**, the family

had the right to return free of charge to its original inheritance. In this way God made it plain that the land belonged to Him. The Israelites were effectively His tenants, their possession of the land being dependent on their obedience to His rules. The Law also included provision for a rich relation to come along at any time and buy back the land for the impoverished family, at a value equivalent to the number of years left before the next Jubilee. This is one of the themes of the tiny book of Ruth.

Following on from this declaration, the next chapter lists the wonderful **blessings** God would send to His people if they obeyed his commands – peace and plenty. But there follows a much longer list of the **curses** that would descend on them for disobedience – war, disease, and famine. These curses have a prophetic ring, since they all came to pass, as we shall find as we read on into the Old Testament. Ultimately, said the Lord, *'I will scatter you among the nations and draw out a sword after you; your land shall be desolate and your cities waste'* (Leviticus 26 v 33). The final scattering of the Jews came 40 years after the time of Jesus, when the Romans drove them out of their land. Even then, being a God of mercy, the chapter concludes *'for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, nor shall I abhor them, to utterly destroy them and break my covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD.'* (verse 44, 45). Thus God promises, one day, to forgive His erring people and bring them back to the land he promised to Abraham.

The last chapter of Leviticus is devoted to the subject of **vows** – the situation where an Israelite asked for God's help, and promised to give something back to Him in return. The Levites are given rules for different

vows, with a pleasing symmetry and logic for deciding how to place a monetary value on gifts such as a block of land.

After this digression to lay down important rulings for the priests, the Bible narrative returns to the wilderness journey with the book of Numbers.

© Copyright David Pearce, used with permission.