

# Leviticus

By Ross Callaghan

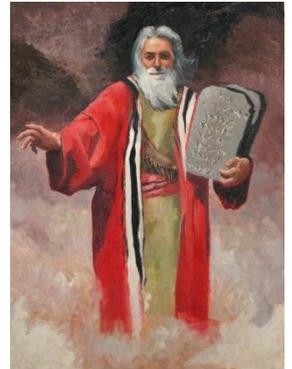
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## Leviticus

Leviticus is the third book in the Bible and in the Pentateuch - the "five volumes" that make up the Hebrew *Torah*. Leviticus is largely concerned with the duties of the Levitical priests.

## Author

Moses is the traditional author of Leviticus and of the other books in the Pentateuch, which is why Leviticus is sometimes known as the "Third Book of Moses". On several occasions the Lord commanded Moses to write down His words *on a scroll*. e.g. Exodus 17:14; 34:27,28. The five books of the Pentateuch, including Leviticus, are the product of that writing, although there may have been slight changes to spelling and grammar as the scrolls were hand-copied over the centuries.



## Date

Scholars are divided as to when the Israelites left Egypt and travelled through the wilderness to Canaan. Some think it happened at the end of the 15th century BC, others early in the 13th century BC. The events described in Leviticus took place about 1 year after leaving Egypt. The tabernacle was consecrated exactly 1 year after the Israelites left (Exodus 40:17), and they then spent another month at Sinai, during which time the laws in Leviticus were given to Moses. One month later (Numbers 1:1) the Israelites left Sinai and began their journey through the wilderness.

## Background

The final chapters of Genesis describe how the children of Israel had settled in Egypt due to a famine in their homeland of Canaan. They were rescued by the intervention of one of Jacob's twelve sons, Joseph, who had risen to become the Pharaoh's right hand man. The Israelites lived in Egypt for 430 years and became slaves, with the Egyptians cruelly using them as a labour force to build the city of Rameses, at that time the capital of Lower Egypt. The Israelites multiplied rapidly over the 430 years and became a threat to the Egyptian rulers so persecution intensified and they were in great danger of being completely wiped out as a family nation. God raised up Moses as the person who would deliver His people from bondage to Egypt and who would lead them back to their homeland of Canaan: their "Promised Land".

Exodus tells the story of how Moses was raised up and how he led the Israelites out of Egypt towards the Promised Land. It shows how God gave the Law to His people (including the 10 commandments); provided for His people as they travelled through the wilderness; dealt with their grumbling and rebellion, and revealed Himself to them in the Tabernacle. Leviticus describes how God revealed further laws to Moses in the Tent of Meeting, and how the Levitical priesthood was established. It adds greater detail to the laws for how the three great Feasts are to be celebrated, and to how the Sabbath is to be observed. Blessings for obedience and penalties for disobedience are clear.

Leviticus is followed by Numbers and Deuteronomy, which describe the 40-year journey to the Promised Land. The final chapters of Deuteronomy describe how Moses led the Israelites right up to the Jordan River on the border of Canaan, and how he died without actually entering the Promised Land.

## Main themes

Leviticus sets out the terms by which a holy God could have a relationship with His sinful people. It is based around four main themes:

- **Law**

The laws described in Leviticus are based on the 10 commandments and the laws described in Exodus, but have much greater detail. They show how God expects His people to behave especially with respect to

offerings (Chapter 1-7); ordination of priests (Chapters 8-10); health and human relationships (Chapters 11-21); priestly duties (Chapters 21,22); annual feasts (Chapters 23-25); rewards and punishments (Chapter 26), and redemption (Chapter 27).

- **Holiness**

“*Be holy because I am holy*” is repeated a numbers of times throughout Leviticus. To be holy means “to be set apart or consecrated for a righteous cause”. God Himself is holy, and He calls his chosen people to be a holy nation, set apart as His own, and not allied with any other nation or people. Individual Israelites are also to be holy. They could be holy by being “clean” as a result of being chosen by God and undergoing the prescribed sacrifices. (Cleanness in Leviticus means being free of any abnormality. Anything short of perfection is seen as “unclean” Any blemish or abnormality in people or animals makes them unclean, but the worst uncleanness is death, the opposite of perfect life). When someone was holy all uncleanness was removed and they could obey God and be like Him. Holiness is what would distinguish the Israelites from all other peoples and would demonstrate to all nations what God was like.

- **Sacrifice**

In practice the Israelites couldn't live up to the required standards of God's holiness. They continually sinned and came into contact with unclean people, animals or situations, which made them unclean This meant they couldn't stay in relationship with God so He instituted a sacrificial system by which their sins could be forgiven and their uncleanness removed. Leviticus describes the kinds of sacrifice that had to be made for a range of sins and situations. Repentance and the death of the sacrifice in place of the people made atonement – a covering over of the sin, forgiveness and restitution. It also emphasised the seriousness of sin and the importance of maintaining fellowship with God and with others.

- **Covenant**

The laws in Leviticus are part of the covenant God made with the Israelites at Sinai. The covenant (agreement) created a personal relationship whereby the Lord would be Israel's king, and Israel His chosen people, set apart from the other nations of the world. The covenant was based on the promise God had made to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-8) and demonstrated God's faithfulness in keeping this promise, and His ongoing love for Israel. In turn, Israel was to obey God, stay as His special people, have nothing to do with the gods of other nations, and keep God's law. The covenant contained promises of blessing for obedience (including inheritance of the Promised Land, health, victory over enemies, and God's continuing presence with them), and consequences for disobedience (including drought, famine, defeat by enemies and possible expulsion from the Promised Land).

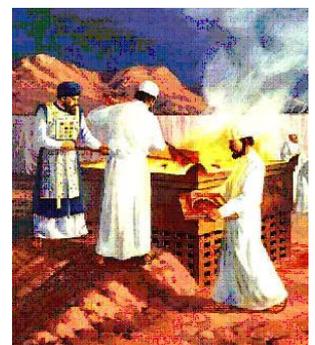
## Content

### Chapters 1-7. Regulations for sacrifices and offerings.

These chapters describe how the different kinds of sacrifices were to be offered in the tabernacle (and later, in the temple). For each type of sacrifice the regulations describe what the people must do and what the priest must do. Typically the sacrifices were to make atonement for sins or to remove uncleanness, and have regulations for both people and priests. The regulations are in two parts; the first part describes the sacrifice and the second how much of the sacrifice could be eaten, and by whom, and how much must be burned. Anyone who wasn't a priest could not eat any fat or blood or eat sacrificial meat when they were unclean. If they did, they could be cut off from Israel.

#### **Burnt offerings. 1:1-17 and 6:8-13.**

For burnt offerings the people brought their animals into the outer court of the tabernacle; placed their hands on the head of the animal and explained to the priest why they were bringing the sacrifice. They then killed the animal and chopped it up. The priest caught the blood of the animal and splashed it over the altar, then burned the animal on the great altar in the court of the tabernacle. The animal had to be a *male without defect* and could be a young bull, a sheep or goat, or a bird. After the sacrifice the priests disposed of the ashes at a ceremonially clean place outside the camp. This was the most common sacrifice and was offered for many different reasons. By giving the whole animal to God in the sacrifice, the people were symbolically offering themselves completely to God's service. The burnt offering *made atonement* and was a *pleasing aroma* to the Lord.



**Grain (or meal) offerings. 2:1-16 and 6:14-23.**

Grain offerings were made of *fine flour* on which oil and incense were poured. Grain offerings always accompanied burnt offerings, but could also be offered alone. Only part of the grain offering was burned so the leftovers were available for the priests to eat or use for income.

**Fellowship (or peace) offerings. 3:1-17 and 7:11-21.**

Peace offerings were the only sacrifices where the people were allowed to eat part of the meat themselves. The Israelites were not permitted to shed the blood of animals except for use in sacrifices (see Chapter 17), so every meal that included meat had to be from a peace offering. Situations that might warrant a peace offering were:

- *expression of thankfulness* to God;
- the *result of a vow*;
- a *freewill offering*; - just because the person wanted to.

**Sin offerings. 4:1-5:13 and 6:24-30.**

All of the sacrifices provided a way by which sin could be forgiven, so sin offerings weren't the only offerings dealing with sin. In sin offerings the blood of the sacrifice wasn't splashed over the altar as in the other sacrifices, but was smeared over the horns on the corners of the large altar in the courtyard, or over the small altar inside the Holy Place. Once a year the blood was sprinkled over the Ark in the Holy of Holies, during the annual sacrifice made by the High Priest on behalf of all the people.(16:14). Sin offerings were made when people inadvertently broke a commandment, or when they had a discharge or skin disease that made them unclean for a week or more (See chapters 12,15).

**Guilt (or trespass) offerings. 5:14-6:7 and 7:1-10.**

Guilt offerings were for more serious offenses such as theft or misuse of God's name (which was considered to be 'robbing God'). A ram had to be offered as a 'repayment' for the theft. Poor people could offer a bird for all of the other sacrifices, but a ram was always required for a guilt offering.

**Christians and the Jewish Law.**

The Law was given so that the Israelites could have a relationship with God. If they followed the Law and completely obeyed all of God's commandments they would be righteous and could have a relationship with their righteous God. This proved to be impossible so the Law included a way by which any sins they committed could be forgiven. Sacrifices were to be made and the blood of an animal shed to make atonement for sin. The animal died so that its owner didn't have to. (The wages of sin is always death. Romans 6:23). The sacrifices had to be repeated regularly because the people sinned regularly, so an annual sacrifice was made by the High priest on behalf of all of the people.

This whole system didn't work! The people couldn't keep the commandments, and the sacrifices were not able to bring about lasting forgiveness for sin. What was needed was a "once for all, for all time sacrifice". God provided this when Jesus, His Son, came as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. (John 1:29). When Jesus' blood was shed at the Cross, atonement was made once for all so that anyone could be righteous in God's sight (in Christ) and thus have a relationship with Him. *God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.* 2 Corinthians 5:21.

Through His life, death and resurrection Jesus has fulfilled all the requirements of the Law and Christians (who are 'in Christ') are no longer under that Law but are now under grace. Romans 8:3,4. In fulfilling the Law Jesus gave us a 'new commandment' that encompasses the whole Jewish Law (and perhaps makes even greater demands on us?) – the requirement to love others. *A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* John 13:34.

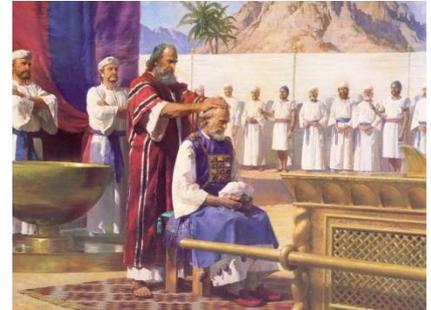
Because Jesus has fulfilled the Jewish Law it no longer has any relevance for Christians (including the 10 commandments). We are to be led by the Holy Spirit, do what God wants us to do and live in love. See Romans Chapters 1-11, Mark 12:29-31; John 13:34,35; John 14:15-27; Matthew 5:17-20, 22:37-39; Ephesians 2:14-18, Colossians 2:6-23; Hebrews 10:1-18; James 2:8-13; 1 John 3 etc. Acts 15 describes how the Church Council examined this issue and decreed that Christian believers had no obligation to follow the Jewish Law.

Jesus death on the Cross also put an end to the Old Testament sacrificial system which was part of the Law. The sacrifices were imperfect and have now been replaced by Jesus' one perfect sacrifice. See 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Colossians 1:15-23; 1 Peter 1:13-25; Hebrews 1:10-18; 7:23-10:18. These verses show that the new covenant makes the old obsolete.

## Chapters 8-10. The beginnings of the Priesthood.

This section tells how Moses ordained Aaron and his sons to be priests and how they offered their first sacrifices. It is rather ironic that Aaron should have been chosen to be the high priest, as he was the one who made the golden calf and encouraged the people to worship it. (See Exodus 32). God chose Aaron, the chief sinner, to be the chief mediator between God and His people! What a great demonstration of God's grace, mercy and forgiveness!

Aaron and his sons were ordained as priests in an elaborate ritual watched by the *entire assembly* of the people. They were clothed in richly decorated garments, anointed with oil, and then Moses offered the three sacrifices on their behalf: a *bull for the sin offering*; a *ram for the burnt offering* and a *ram for the ordination*. After a week of rituals the priests were set apart from the rest of the people and consecrated for their holy office. From the eighth day Moses no longer offered sacrifices; the priesthood having been fully passed over to Aaron and his sons. When Aaron offered his first sacrifice he *lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them*; the *glory of the Lord appeared to all the people*; and *fire from the Lord came down and consumed the offering*. The people rejoiced greatly!



Unexpectedly Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu offered an *unauthorised* sacrifice and were consumed by fire because they had disobeyed the Lord. Priests were supposed to set an example by always obeying the Lord, (the central aspect of being holy) so their disobedience could not be allowed. Aaron *was silent* when God explained that *among those who approach Me I will show Myself to be holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured*. Aaron and his surviving sons were confirmed as priests and were reminded that their role was *to distinguish between the holy and the common; between the clean and the unclean*; and that they were to *teach the Israelites all the decrees that the Lord had given them through Moses*.

This section closes on another note of grace. When the new priests Eliezer and Ithamar made a mistake in offering one of the sin offerings, Moses was angry but Aaron showed him that God would overlook their action and Moses *was satisfied* with this.

### Christians and the priesthood.

God created people to fellowship with Himself in a direct and unhindered way. He never intended there to be any intermediary between any person and Himself. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve's actions in the garden put a stop to this! Sin entered so a way that sin could be forgiven and dealt with became necessary. The sacrificial system was instituted as part of the Jewish Law and Priests became important as intermediaries between God and the people.

The sacrificial system was imperfect so in the fullness of time God sent His Son Jesus as a "once for all, for all time sacrifice". Jesus was the *Lamb of God* who would finally and completely *take away the sin of the world*. (John 1:29). When Jesus' blood was shed at the Cross, atonement was made *once for all* so that anyone could be righteous in God's sight and have unhindered fellowship with Him. Jesus' one perfect sacrifice fulfilled all of the imperfect sacrifices of the Jewish sacrificial system so sacrifices and priests were no longer needed. Jesus Himself was *our great High Priest* and the only intermediary needed between God and His people. See 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Colossians 1:15-23; 1 Peter 1:13-25; Hebrews 1:10-18; 7:23-10:18.

Predictable, the High Priest and Jewish leaders at the time rejected Jesus and the Jewish sacrificial system continued on, even though it was no longer a viable way of getting right with God. When the Temple was destroyed in AD 70 all sacrifices ceased because there was no suitable place in which they could take place and no animal sacrifices are made in Judaism to this day.

The early Christians recognized that there was no longer any need for a priest to be an intermediary between God and His people. They knew that they were all part of a *royal priesthood* with direct access to God from their wonderful position "*in Christ*". *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness and into His wonderful light*. 1 Peter 2:9. Christians today still enjoy this position of access to God in Christ Jesus!

Things changed, though, in 380 AD when the Church became institutionalized as the state religion of Rome.

Pagan gods were widely worshipped throughout the Roman Empire, and people were regularly involved in Temple meetings. These had their “own order of service”, led by priests and focused on the making of sacrifices. When Christianity became the state religion of Rome, Christian rituals and content were added to the pagan rituals and this order of service became the “Roman Catholic Mass”. The man most responsible for shaping the Mass was Pope Gregory the Great (540–604AD), the first monk to be made Pope. He was a very superstitious man strongly influenced by “magic, heathenism and Christianity”. The central part of the Mass was the Eucharist – a resacrificing of Jesus based on the belief that the elements of bread and wine were being transformed into the body and blood of Christ. (transubstantiation). The Mass that Gregory developed has remained virtually unchanged over the centuries, and priests are still seen in Catholicism as being intermediaries between God and His people.

Then came the Reformation. In 1517 Martin Luther published his 95 theses criticising Catholic practice and in 1520 launched a campaign against the Catholic Mass, saying that it was a “human work” based on an inaccurate understanding of Christ’s sacrifice. The Eucharist (communion) was seen as a memorial of the body and blood of Christ, not a resacrificing of it, and priests as intermediaries were rejected in favour of “the priesthood of all believers”.

These days Catholic and Anglican churches still have priests and the rituals of the Eucharist are central in their Church services. Most Protestant churches, however, are led by Ministers or Pastors. Their people are encouraged to have a personal relationship with the Lord, rather than having to go to Him through a priest. Jesus is seen as the only mediator between themselves and God (1 Timothy 2:5) and is honoured as our *great high priest*, the One who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice *once for all*. (Hebrews 7:23–28). Because all believers are priests and can have direct access to God in Christ Jesus, there is certainly no need for intermediaries like priests. The Levitical sacrificial system has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and so has the Levitical priesthood!

## **Chapters 11-15. Regulations regarding cleanness and uncleanness.**

This section describes regulations for distinguishing between clean and unclean foods and how to deal with potentially unclean situations like childbirth, skin diseases, mildew and bodily discharges.

### **Living things that can be eaten 11:1-47.**

These regulations describe the living things that are clean and which may be eaten; and those that are unclean and which must not be eaten. They also show how touching of some unclean animals or touching a dead animal makes people unclean. A person who was unclean through touching a dead animal could not enter the tabernacle that day. Various reasons have been put forward as to why some animals were considered unclean including:

- because they had been used in pagan worship or represented as gods;
- because they had hygiene issues eg. carrion eaters.

Land animals are dealt with first, then fish and birds, and finally creatures like insects and reptiles.

- Clean land animals are those that *have a split hoof and chew the cud* (i.e. sheep and cattle but not pigs and camels)
- Clean fish *have fins and scales*.
- All birds are clean except for birds of prey and scavengers (eagles, vultures, kites, ravens, owls, gulls, cormorants, ospreys, storks, herons and bats).
- Clean insects are those that have wings and two large hopping legs – like locusts and grasshoppers. All others are unclean.
- Creatures that *move about on the ground* like weasels, rats and lizards are unclean.

### **Purification after childbirth. 12:1-8.**

These regulations cover dealing with the discharge that comes after childbirth, and with the purification of mother and child (including circumcision of baby boys). In the Old Testament death was seen as the ultimate uncleanness so conditions (like childbirth) that could threaten life were also seen as unclean. When their discharges stop mothers must bring a burnt offering and a sin offering to atone for any sin they may have committed, and to purify the tabernacle that may have been polluted through their uncleanness.

### **Uncleanness caused by skin diseases and mildew.13:1-14:57.**

These regulations enable priests to distinguish between different skin diseases and mildews found on pieces of cloth or on the walls of houses. The regulations helped the priests decide whether afflicted people were unclean or not. If people were unclean, they had to live outside the camp until their skin healed. Sometimes the skin diseases are referred to as leprosy but this is unlikely to be correct, as true leprosy

was unknown in the Middle East at this time. It is more likely to refer to skin diseases like rashes and psoriasis, (which explains why the disease might suddenly get better, which could not happen if the disease was leprosy). If a skin disease or mildew did get better the afflicted person could call the priest, and if the priest was satisfied they were disease-free they could be readmitted to the community after following all of the regulations.

### **Discharges causing uncleanness. 15:1-33.**

Men can become unclean through discharges due to venereal disease or emission of semen and women can become unclean through menstruation or long-term discharges. Regulations are given for cleansing the person and anything they touch. These regulations helped to discourage the temple prostitution that was common in the ancient world and helped protect unmarried women from unwelcome advances.

This section concludes with God's explanation of why the Israelites had to deal with their uncleanness *You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so that they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling My dwelling place, which is among them.*

### **Jewish attitude to the Law.**

Christians often see the Jewish Law as being a negative set of regulations which, if broken, lead to punishment, and which make daily living difficult. Worse than that, the Law is thought to set standards which are impossible to keep.

This is nothing like how Jews see the Law!

To believing Jews the law was a very positive thing; a path in which they could delight, and a way by which they could find richness in life. See Psalm 119:33-40. To them the Law wasn't a rod to bring them under discipline; rather it was a teaching, that if followed, led to great blessing. Jewish response to the Law started with love for God, not with a slavish obedience. This approach to the Law is echoed in Jesus' words *If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.* John 14;15.

### **Chapter 16. Regulations for the Day of Atonement. 16:1-34.**

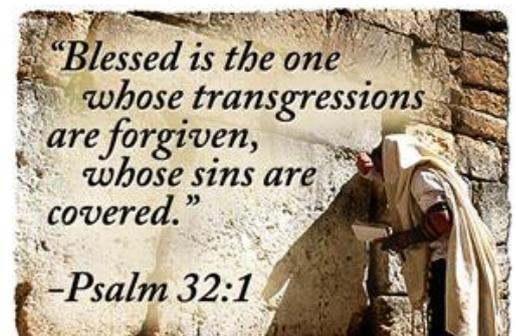
This section describes how *atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites.*

The regulations for the Day of Atonement *cleanse the Most Holy Place (tabernacle) because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been.* Without this cleansing God could not have inhabited the tabernacle, which would have been disastrous for the people.

The cleansing of the tabernacle on the Day of Atonement was needed *once a year* and three important acts took place:

- The High Priest made a sin offering and sprinkled blood to cleanse each part of the tabernacle: the outer altar of burnt offering, the incense altar inside the Holy Place, and the Ark in the Holy of Holies.
- The High Priest made a sin offering for himself and his household, and then another sin offering for the sins of the people. This was the one occasion in the year when the High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies and encountered the presence of God so elaborate precautions had to be taken to protect him from the glory of God. A scapegoat was chosen and the nation's sin was symbolically placed on it. The goat was then led out to a solitary place and set free, symbolising the fact that the nation was now free of sin. In later times the scapegoat was pushed over a precipice so that Israel's sins could no longer disturb the peace between God and his people.
- There was much public prayer and fasting to show that sin could not be dealt with easily. It required a complete change of heart by every person in Israel.

The Day of Atonement was to be a *lasting ordinance* by which *atonement was made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites.*



### **Celebration of The Day of Atonement today**

The Day of Atonement is now called Yom Kippur. It is the holiest day of the year for Jewish people and is held on 10<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh month (Tishrei – September/October) as part of the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). Jewish people traditionally observe this holy day with a day of fasting, repentance and prayer, often spending most of the day in synagogue services. It is a day of rest with no eating and drinking; wearing of leather shoes; bathing or washing; use of perfumes or lotions, or marital relations. The sacrificial service from Leviticus is recited, but no sacrifice is made because there is now no temple in Jerusalem.

### **Chapters 17 – 25. Regulations for daily living.**

The focus in Leviticus now changes from the Israelites' religious duties towards God, to their practical day-to-day duties towards other people.

- Sacrifices are to only be made in the courtyard of the tabernacle not out in the open fields. This was to prevent the Israelites from secretly worshipping heathen gods.
- Eating of blood is strictly forbidden *for the life of a creature is in the blood. Blood was to make atonement on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life* so it was not to be eaten. (To comply with this Jews still try to remove blood from their meat before they eat it. The main technique used is called *melihah*, in which the meat is soaked in water for about half an hour, and then covered with salt and left for up to an hour. The salt draws blood from the meat and is shaken off before the meat is washed and cooked. This makes the meat *kosher* – acceptable for eating). That blood could not be eaten explains the disciples' reaction (and the Jewish leaders' anger) when Jesus said:

*“Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For My flesh is real food and My blood is real drink. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks my blood remains in Me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent Me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on Me will live because of Me. He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. On hearing it, many of His disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”* John 6: 53-60. Jesus knew His blood would be shed to make atonement for sin *once for all* so He could not only say such a thing, but could also encourage us to participate in His death and resurrection (as we believe in Him and are saved) and participate in a remembrance of His broken body and shed blood each time we take communion. See 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 11:23-26.

- Sexual relations with relatives, neighbours, others of the same sex, and animals are forbidden, as is sacrificing of children to idols. These actions cause the people and the land to be defiled so those who sin in any of these ways are to be severely punished, often by being *put to death* or by being *cut off* from the community.

Chapter 19 gives a number of specific laws which are similar to, or expand on, the 10 commandments.

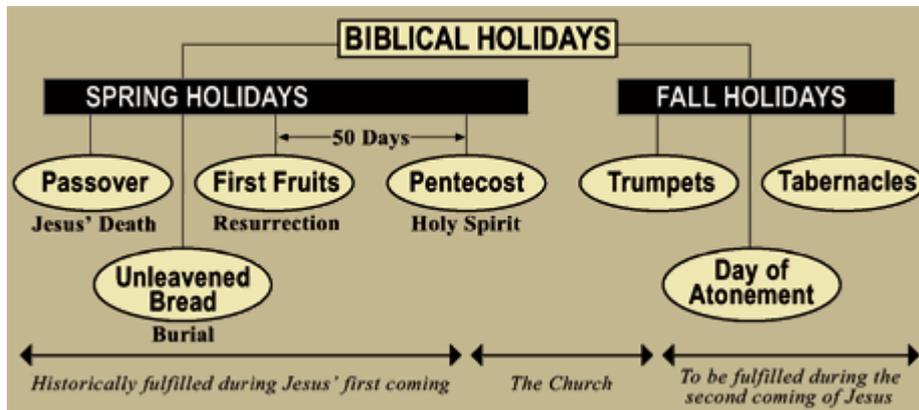
- Children must respect their parents. All must show respect for the elderly.
- The Sabbath day must be kept holy.
- There must be no involvement in idolatry, sorcery, witchcraft, prostitution or tattooing.
- People must interact with each other in honest, respectful, caring and just ways. The responsibility of each Israelite (and Christian) is summed up in what has come to be known as the “Royal Law”: *Love your neighbour as yourself.*
- Provision must be made for the poor, and for aliens.

The over-riding message from the Lord is *Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.* As God's people the Israelites must honour Him in all their ways: *Keep all My decrees and all My laws and follow them. I am the Lord.*

Chapters 21 and 22 give regulations for the Priests. They must be holy and take special care to stay clean, especially the High Priest. Priests must not be near dead bodies unless the dead are close relatives; must marry virtuous women, and must not have any physical deformities. The priests are representatives of the Lord and so must reflect His holiness and treat the *sacred offerings* they make with much respect. If priests become temporarily unclean through a skin disease or a discharge, they may resume their duties as soon as their uncleanness is cured. They must not make unacceptable sacrifices e.g. using animals with a

defect, and must always *keep God's commands and follow them*. This is because *God must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites*.

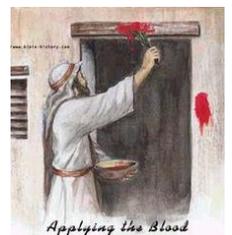
Chapter 23 lists the holy days and feasts (sacred assemblies) that are to be held during the year, and the sacrifices that are to be offered for each one.



The special celebrations are:

- **The Sabbath (Shabbat)** is to be held every week (Friday sundown to Saturday sundown). It is a *day of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the Lord*. The Sabbath is still relevant for Christians, but not as Sunday or a day off work or a day to attend Church. Hebrews tells us that *there remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also rest from their own work, just as God did from His*. The Christian Sabbath is to live under the Lordship of Christ and do what He wants you to do, as revealed by the Holy Spirit. If you do this you will cease from your own labours, fulfil God's purposes, and enjoy an ongoing state of spiritual rest.
- **The Passover (Pesach), the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Chag HaMotzi), and the Feast of Firstfruits (Reshit Katzir)**. These feasts all took place in the spring (March-June).

**Passover** celebrates the deliverance from Egypt when the Lord passed over the homes of the Israelites who had placed the blood of a lamb on their doorposts, thus bringing them salvation. See Exodus 12. Passover is held every year on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month (Nisan – equivalent to our March/April). Jesus fulfilled this feast when He was crucified on the very day, Pesach, over 2000 years ago. He is our *Passover Lamb* who *takes away the sin of the world*. See John 1:29 and Hebrews Chapters 9 and 10.



**The Feast of Unleavened Bread** is held on the seven days following the Passover. Leaven (or yeast) symbolises sin so eating of unleavened bread reminded the Jewish people to walk in holiness. The feast dates back to the time of the Exodus when the Israelites had to leave Egypt in such a hurry that they didn't put leaven in their bread because they didn't have time to wait for it to rise. See Exodus 12. Jesus' death on the Cross fulfilled this feast, as the shedding of His blood made possible a life of holiness, health and eternal life. Jesus was buried on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.



**The Feast of First Fruits** is held on the day after the Sabbath following the Feast of Unleavened Bread. (Leviticus 23:11). It celebrates the fertility and fruitfulness of the land given to the Israelites – *a land flowing with milk and honey*. Jesus fulfilled this feast when He rose from the dead on the Sunday – the day on which the feast was held. Jesus' was the first of countless millions raised up to eternal life and His life and ministry have been unparalleled throughout history for their fruitfulness. See 1 Corinthians 15:20-28.

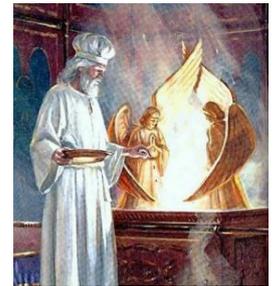


- **The Feast of Pentecost (Shavu'ot).** This feast is held fifty days later and was a celebration of the harvest. Gleanings from the harvest were to be left so there was food for the poor. The Feast of Pentecost was fulfilled when the Holy Spirit fell and the Christian Church was established, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection. See Acts 1,2. It ushered in an era of great harvest for the Kingdom of God which spread throughout the world and continues to this day.
- **The Feast of Trumpets (Yom Teru'ah), the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot).** These feasts take place in the fall (September, October).

**The Feast of Trumpets** begins with a blast of trumpets which call the people to a special sacred assembly. Trumpets (shofar) were made of animal horns and were blown to call the people together. Trumpets will be blown when Jesus returns to fulfil this feast, at some time in the future. 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 1 Corinthians 15:50-57.



**The Day of Atonement.** This is the most holy day of the year. It is the day on which the High Priest enters the Holiest of Holies and makes atonement for the sins of the people. See Leviticus 16. This day will also be fulfilled when Jesus returns to gather all His people to Himself.



**The Feast of Tabernacles (or booths).** This feast lasts for 7 days and celebrates how God provided shelters for the Israelites in the wilderness. They are to build little booths outside their houses and live in them for the seven days. The Feast of Tabernacles looks forward to the time after Jesus returns when all of God's people will live with Him in shelter and safety in the world to come. See Revelation 21,22.

See <http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Introduction/introduction.html> for a concise overview of each of the feasts and [http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Fall\\_Holidays/Yom\\_Kippur/yom\\_kippur.html](http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Fall_Holidays/Yom_Kippur/yom_kippur.html) for more detail on the Day of Atonement.

Chapter 24 deals with the lamp which must be *kept burning continually* in the tabernacle, and with the bread that is to be presented to the Lord each Sabbath, then eaten by the priests. It also describes how someone who blasphemed the name of the Lord was stoned because *anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death.* (As must those who take someone else's life. By comparison, if someone kills someone else's animal they must make restitution, and if they injure someone else they *what they have done must be done to them; fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth*).

Chapter 25 shows how the land must be rested for a year after 6 years of cropping. *The land is to have a Sabbath of rest, a Sabbath to the Lord.* It then describes the Year of Jubilee that is to be held for one year, every fifty years. Everyone must return to their own property, slaves were to be freed and debts were to be forgiven. Those who had lost their lands to pay for debts were given them back. This could happen because ultimately the land was seen as belonging to God - *the land is Mine and you are but aliens and My tenants.* The Year of Jubilee enabled everyone in the community to make a fresh start every 50 years. Its main focus was on helping the poor but it also helped prevent people becoming too rich through exploitation of others by charging interest or enslaving the more unfortunate. Aliens and temporary residents were also able to benefit from its provisions. The Year of Jubilee was based on a sense of justice and respect for others: *Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. Then the land will yield its fruit and you will eat your fill and live there in safety.* Would that all social welfare systems today had such beneficial goals and outcomes!



## Chapter 26. Rewards for obedience and punishments for disobedience,

Chapter 26 gives the rewards for obedience and the punishments for disobedience that form the conditions of God's covenant with the Israelites.

**Obedience:** If the Israelites will obey the Lord He will:

- send rain in season so they have good harvests.
- grant peace in the land.
- look on them with favour so they are fruitful and increase in numbers.
- dwell among them and keep His covenant with them.



**Disobedience:** If the Israelites disobey the Lord He will:

- bring *sudden terror* on them including diseases and fevers.
- cause their planting of seed to fail.
- let them be defeated by enemies.

After this if they still won't obey Him He will:

- punish them for their sins *seven times over* and multiply their afflictions *seven times over*.
- send a plague among them.
- give them over to enemies.
- cut off their food supplies.
- lay waste their cities and scatter them among the nations so the land lies desolate for its period of Sabbaths (70 years) and their people perish.

Then if they confess their sins, humble themselves and pay for their sin, God will remember His covenant and *will not destroy them completely*.

It seems incredible that a nation would choose to disobey the Lord given these conditions, but that is exactly what Israel did. When they entered the Promised Land they disobeyed the Lord and made alliances with the Canaanites and their gods. God wanted to bless them and consistently poured His love upon them but they continued to reject Him and turn away from His standards. Finally, God had had enough and did exactly what He said He would do. He sent the Israelites into captivity in Babylon for a period of 70 years.

The books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles describe how this falling away from the Lord took place, leading up to the captivity in Babylon. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe how the Israelites came back to their land after the 70-year period and enjoyed a new measure of God's blessing after their sins had been purged.

## Chapter 27. Regulations about vows and gifts offered to God.

Chapter 27 is an appendix to the Book of Leviticus. It deals with vows and other gifts which have been dedicated to God, including gifts of people, animals, houses, parts of a family and land. If someone promises to give something to God it becomes *holy to the Lord* and cannot be retracted unless a suitable payment is made, set by the priests. A tenth part (tithe) of the produce from the land (plants and animals) belongs to the Lord and must be given to the priests without picking out good or bad items.

And so the book of Leviticus finishes. It contains *the commands the Lord gave Moses on Mount Sinai for the Israelites. Based on the covenant he made with them.* The Israelites are now clear on their responsibilities under the Law, and of how the sacrifices to cleanse their sin must be carried out. At this stage they still don't know that God has something much better than this for them and for all mankind: a **new covenant** to be brought in through the Lord Jesus Christ; one in which the Law will be written upon peoples' hearts:

*"This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time" declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be My people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour or a man his brother saying 'Know the Lord,' because all will know Me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."* Jeremiah 31:33,34.

The next book in the Torah, the book of Numbers describes the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness. The final book, Deuteronomy, tells how God renewed the covenant He had made with His people, and reviews the ways that God dealt with His people as they approached the Promised Land of Canaan.

### Development of the Jewish Law.

The Jewish Law (*Halakha*) has developed and changed over time as the Law that God gave to the Moses has been interpreted and applied to everyday life.

The *Halakha* is the collective body of Jewish religious laws: It is made up of:

- **The Written Law** which is found in the first five books of the Bible (the **Torah**). It is based on the original 631 *mitzvot* (commandments), including the “10 commandments”.
- **The Oral Law** which is made up of the laws, statutes and legal interpretations that were believed to have been given orally by God to Moses, and then passed on in an unbroken chain from generation to generation through the Rabbis. (It is sometimes called Rabbinical Law). The Oral Law was written down after the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70 and is regarded as just as authoritative and inspired as the Written Law. It is a code of conduct that covers all areas of life including rituals, worship, relationships, religious observances, diet, marital relations, agricultural practices, and civil disputes. The Oral Law is recorded in the **Mishnah**, compiled between 200–220 AD, and the **Gemara**, an open series of commentaries and debates on the Mishnah and how it relates to everyday life. Together the Mishnah and the Gemara make up **the Talmud**, the main text of Judaism.

## Discussion questions

1. Why was the book of Leviticus written as part of the 5 books of the Torah? How does Leviticus link with the other books?
2. What can you learn from the book of Exodus about how God involves Himself in the life of His people?
3. Leviticus contains a set of regulations relating to sacrifices and offerings; functioning of the priests; cleanness and uncleanness; daily living; and celebration of the Sabbath and the annual feasts. Who were these regulations written for? Are they relevant for Jewish people today? Are they relevant for Christians today?
4. What is the Jewish law? Why was it given, and how has it changed over the years? What does “Jesus has fulfilled the Law” mean? Describe the New Testament teaching regarding the Jewish law and explain whether the Law is still binding on Christians today? What does it mean for Christians to be “not under law” but “under grace”?
5. Describe how Jesus has fulfilled the various aspects of the Law described in Leviticus. Include the law and regulations, the sacrifices, the priesthood, the feasts, and the covenant.
6. What have you learned from your study of Leviticus? How will you apply this in your life in the future?