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INTRODUCTION

TITLE AND PLACE IN THE PENTATEUCH

The third book of the Old Testament was identified among the Hebrew scrolls by its opening word, *wayyiqra*, “and he called.” When it was translated into Greek (in the Septuagint) in the third century B.C., it was entitled *Leveitikon* or *Levitikon*, an adjective qualifying *Biblion* (book). The Latin version (Vulgate) centuries later was entitled *The Levitical*, from which our English title *Leviticus* is derived.

The Jews seemed to have a better designation for the scope of this book when in the Mishnah they called it the “priests’ law,” “priests’ book,” and “law of offerings.” Later, in the Talmud, they designated it as “Law of the priests.” The Syrian Christians called it in the Peshitta “the book of the priests.”

Although this book deals largely with priestly matters, the Levites are mentioned only once (25:32-34), not in reference to ritual functions but with regard to conditions governing land tenure. A careful reading of the text indicates that the book was addressed to Moses, Aaron, the congregation of Israel, and the priests, to guide them in maintaining a vital relationship with God in matters of worship, religious celebrations, and holy living.

The book of Leviticus is essential to the Pentateuch. The history of Israel began with the establishment of a vital relationship between God and Abraham, delineated in God’s covenantal promise to the patriarchs (Gen. 12-50). When God called Moses, His promise was renewed and confirmed

through His mighty acts in leading Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 1-18). As the Israelites were encamped at Mount Sinai, God established His covenant with them as a nation (Ex. 19-24).

The Israelites camped at Mount Sinai approximately one year, leaving under divine guidance on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year after the Exodus (Num. 10:11). While at Mount Sinai, God gave to Israel through Moses the most extensive revelation to be recorded in the Old Testament. Consequently, approximately one third of the Pentateuch (Ex. 19-40; Lev. 1-27; and Num. 1-10) relates to Israel's religion and was revealed to them during that year at Mount Sinai. Although most of the material in this part of the Pentateuch is revelatory, several significant events carry the historical narrative along.

1. Most significant was the establishment of God's covenant with Israel (Ex. 19-24). After that, Moses spent two forty-day periods on Mount Sinai. Most of the rest of that year was devoted to elaborate preparation, making the priestly garments and building the Tabernacle, with all its expensive furnishings (Ex. 25-39).
2. The Tabernacle was erected on the first day of the first month of the second year (Ex. 40) and dedicated as the dwelling place of God in the camp of Israel (cf. Num. 7-8).
3. The priesthood was instituted during an eight-day period (Lev. 8-10) in which the Tabernacle and its furnishings were dedicated (Ex. 40).
4. The Passover was observed on the fourteenth day of this month, marking the first anniversary of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt (Num. 9).
5. On the first day of the second month of the second year, a census was taken and Israel was organized, in preparation for her departure from Sinai on the twentieth day of that month (Num. 1-4).

The longest narrative segment in Leviticus, chapters 8-10, describes the institution of the priesthood. That segment is a very significant link in the Pentateuchal narrative and is basic

to an understanding of Israel's relationship with God.

THE MATERIAL OF LEVITICUS

The material of this book lends itself readily to the following divisions:

1. Instructions and laws on sacrifice (chaps. 1-7)
2. Institution of the priesthood (chaps. 8-10)
3. Treatment of uncleanness (chaps. 11-15)
4. The Day of Atonement (chap. 16)
5. Instructions for holy living (chaps. 17-27)

Leviticus has a larger percentage of material attributed to God as the speaker than any other book in the Bible. Repeatedly the statement "God said" or "God commanded" indicates that what follows was given by God to Israel. Moses was the key person to whom and through whom God communicated with His people. Frequently he was instructed to convey God's messages to Aaron, the priests, and to the whole assembly of Israel.

Following is a summary of the divine-human communication in Leviticus:

1. Nine times in chapters 1-7 it is stated that God spoke to Moses, giving instructions concerning sacrifices: God spoke to Moses (5:14; 6:1); God told Moses to speak to the Israelites (1:1; 4:1; 7:22, 28); God spoke to Moses with instructions for Aaron (6:8, 19, 24).
2. Chapters 8-10 state only twice that God spoke, once to Moses (8:1) and once to Aaron (10:8). However these chapters repeatedly say that what was being done was in accordance with what God had commanded. The material in 8:4, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 29, 34, 36 reflects the instructions previously given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 29). Leviticus 9:6, 7, 10, 21 seems to be a freer summary of the instructions in Leviticus 1-7; and 10:7, 13, 15 reflect instructions in chapters 6-7. Thus most of the material in chapters 8-10 originated with God's direct communication.
3. The instructions to Moses concerning uncleanness are

- given in 12:1 (to be conveyed to Israel) and 14:1. Four times God spoke to Moses and Aaron (11:1; 13:1; 14:33; 15:1).
4. The instructions in chapter 16 for observing the Day of Atonement were spoken by God to Moses. The entire chapter is headed by the words "the Lord spoke to Moses," and Moses gave the instructions to Aaron.
 5. Throughout the principles and instructions for holy living (chaps. 17-27), the expression "the Lord spoke to Moses" occurs seventeen times. Eleven sections tell of Moses' being directed to give each message to the Israelites (18:1; 19:1; 20:1; 23:1, 9, 23, 26; 24:1, 13; 25:1; 27:1). Two messages were to be conveyed to Aaron (17:1 and 21:16) and four to Aaron and his sons (21:1; 22:1, 17, 26). The principles and instructions as a whole are considered to have their origin in God.

In light of the above summary, it is obvious that most of the content of Leviticus was revelation, communicated to the Israelites through Moses, whom God chose to speak for Him.

WRITTEN FORM

When was the material in Leviticus committed to writing? According to Exodus 19, the Ten Commandments were spoken by God to the Israelites, but in subsequent days written copies were provided for the Israelites (Ex. 24:4; 34:27-28). After that, Moses addressed the whole Israelite community, instructing it to build the Tabernacle as God had commanded (Ex. 35:4-19). When were the instructions concerning the Tabernacle, the priesthood, offerings and observances (the revelations recorded in Exodus 25-31; 35-39; Leviticus 1-27) committed to writing?

Since the turn of the twentieth century, Old Testament scholarship has maintained that Leviticus, together with parts of Genesis, Exodus and Numbers, constituted a literary document composed in exilic times c. 550 B.C. That priestly document (P), according to the classic exposition of Julius Wellhausen, in his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*

(1878), reflected a religious evolution in which the simple, spontaneous worship of early Israel had developed, by exilic times into a ritualistic legalism. That theory has dominated biblical scholarship for about a century and permeates commentaries, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, and textbooks. Even though the view is purely theoretical, it is accepted by modern, naturalistic scholarship as axiomatic and frequently is not subjected to critical examination.

When that theory was advanced by Wellhausen and his fellow scholars in the nineteenth century, relatively little was known about the cultural, literary, and religious customs of the second millennium B.C., the time of Moses. The Wellhausen dictum that Moses could not write, and that writing before the time of David was limited to specialists, was advocated as late as 1893 (cf. H. Schultz, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:25). Since the turn of the century, archaeological excavations have provided extensive information concerning the cultural context of Old Testament times that necessitates an examination of some of the theories advocated decades ago.

Actually, writing dates back to about 3100 B.C. Egyptian and Akkadian literature has provided evidence of extensive literary interests in the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates centers of education as early as the middle of the third millennium B.C. Before 1929, very few texts of the West Semitic dialects, to which biblical Hebrew belongs, could be traced to earlier than 900 B.C., but the discovery of Ugarit (1929), a Northwest Semitic language quite closely related to Hebrew and Canaanite/Phoenician, gives evidence for its common use along the Mediterranean coast during the thirteenth-fourteenth century B.C. Excavations at Mari along the Euphrates (1930) date the use of the West Semitic dialects back to the eighteenth century B.C. Now the recent discovery of the Ebla-Mardikh literature points to an extensive use of the West Semitic dialects throughout the Kingdom of Ebla, about 2400 B.C.

Thus, significantly, the West Semitic dialects to which Hebrew belongs were in use in the heart of the Fertile Cres-

cent about four centuries before the time of Abraham and approximately a thousand years before the Mosaic era. In the light of that historical and cultural background, it would seem quite appropriate to believe that Moses would have used the Hebrew language to record matters that he considered important for his people, Israel, to know as they settled in Canaan.¹

In view of the priestly nature of the book of Leviticus, it is important, in considering Moses as author, to note the literary involvement of the priesthood in the ancient Near East.²

Early in the third millennium B.C., the Sumerians established the tradition of giving the priesthood responsibility for all forms of education. In major areas of concern, such as the cultus, medicine, civil administration, and law, the important procedural canons were usually committed to writing very early. Those were transmitted in written form by scribes and pupils, without editing or changes in the text. In Egypt, such literature as the "Pyramid texts," medical texts, and Memphite theology, which magnified deity Ptah as the First Cause, was written down in the third millennium B.C.

Scribal practice in the Near East indicates that commonly used liturgies and rituals were committed to writing and passed on for centuries and communicated to the people orally from the written copies. Priestly traditions related to the cultus were especially important and were preserved in writing for repeated usage.

No statement in the book of Leviticus ascribes authorship to Moses. In the book of Exodus certain sections are credited to him (17:14; 24:4; 34:27). The last two references tell of Moses' writing down the material revealed to him at Mount Sinai. Because the bulk of Leviticus was given through direct revelation, it seems logical that Moses would have been equal-

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1. K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1977), p. 49.
 2. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp. 591-98.

ly concerned about preserving it for future generations and thus would have committed it to writing soon after communicating it orally to his people.

During the early years of his life, Moses had been educated in Egypt. In all likelihood he was familiar with, if not involved with, the literary activities of the Egyptian priests who were responsible for education. Since it was customary for the priesthood to commit religious rituals and medical and administrative instructions to writing, it is certainly probable that Moses would have done the same when he was responsible for those matters.

When the materials for building the Tabernacle were collected, Moses assigned the Levites, under the direction of Ithamar, son of Aaron, to make a record of the contributions (Ex. 28:21). It is thus reasonable to assume that Moses asked the Levites and priests also to record the instructions that God communicated to him on Mount Sinai, which may have involved them in research and the writing of the entire Pentateuch before Moses died.

Of particular interest is the literary form in Leviticus of the regulations concerning sacrifices (1:1—7:38). The purity of the Hebrew text in these chapters, which contain only minor difficulties, leads Harrison to conclude that this sacrificial legislation is “an original, unadulterated core of Hebrew” writing.³ It was characteristic in ancient Near Eastern nations to exercise great care in transmitting priestly material in the exact form in which it had been written by the scribes.

The conclusion of that legislation (7:37-38) is written in a colophon form frequently used in ancient Mesopotamian documents. The colophon—often containing the title or designation, the date of writing, and the name of the owner or scribe—was usually the conclusion of a tablet. In the book of Genesis, eleven such literary units are identified by “these are the generations of.” As was characteristic in a colophon, the

3. R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1980), pp. 84-87.

material here is identified as commanded by God (cf. the title in 1:1) and given by Moses, the owner or scribe to whom God gave the regulations “on Mount Sinai on the day He commanded the Israelites to bring their offerings to the Lord, in the Desert of Sinai” (7:38).

Consequently, the material regulating sacrifices is regarded as authentic second-millennium literature. In content and form it is so similar to other literature of that period that it is reasonable to assign the authorship to Moses.

Moses may have been acquainted with quite a few languages of the Fertile Crescent. During the New Kingdom era, Egypt was the most powerful kingdom in the Near East, extending its conquest and control up to the Euphrates River and beyond. Most likely Moses was familiar with the Northwest Semitic language, which included the Eblaite, Hebrew, and other Canaanite languages such as Phoenician and Ugaritic (which used a local cuneiform alphabet). He may also have known the East Semitic (Sumero-Akkadian) common to the Tigris-Euphrates region.

Moses also had training in the history and religion of his forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, especially in regard to the promises God had made to Israel. Being personally involved with Israel’s religion he was aware of its uniqueness in contrast to the religions of the Egyptians and Canaanites. Thus he had a basic concern that the Israelites carefully maintain a vital relationship with God. (That concern was later expressed in his oral communication to all Israel, recorded in Deuteronomy.) Consequently he would have been careful to preserve in writing the revelatory material entrusted to him to communicate to Israel. It would have been quite normal to write the revelations down soon after he had communicated them orally to the priests and the assembly of Israel.

Crucial to the question of when and by whom the book of Leviticus was written is an understanding of revelation and inspiration. Throughout the text, the statement that God spoke to Moses (and Aaron) occurs thirty-eight times. If that frequent assertion is accepted as trustworthy, then God com-

municated orally with Moses in giving His revelation. Does the modern scholar who accepts the standard critical view that Leviticus was written around 550 B.C. accept the material as divinely revealed to Moses? If so, then we may look for some documentation or evidence that the material was transmitted with accuracy for so many centuries after being revealed to Moses. Would inspiration or the guidance of the Holy Spirit ensure that what had been transmitted orally for such a long time would be recorded accurately?

From a human perspective it is reasonable to assume that the reliability of the account would correlate to the proximity in time between the first written copy and Moses himself, the recipient of divine revelation. If Moses had recorded the content of God's revelation without divine aid, the written copy would have been subject to error. If one recognizes with the New Testament writers that the Old Testament was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then the written text can be accepted as a trustworthy and reliable account of what God had revealed to Moses. It was, in fact, accepted as such in New Testament times.

So we see that the book of Leviticus is more than mere history or an ordinary manual for priests. In addition to Moses' historical, cultural, and religious context, one should recognize that *God spoke*, and Moses listened and communicated *God's revelation* to the Israelites, who had been miraculously delivered from Egyptian bondage. Since Moses had written other historical, legal, and revelatory material for his people, as indicated in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, we can be confident that soon after his oral communication, the Leviticus material was committed to writing for future generations.

THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The narrative of Leviticus portrays Israel, an independent nation, in relationship with God. The book gives instructions for many aspects of everyday life, in which the Israelites were to reflect that they were God's holy people. Under the

guidance of the priesthood, they were taught to maintain a right relationship with God through sacrifices and offerings. If the relationship was broken through sin, it could be restored through the proper offering. Observances of the feasts and seasons incorporated into their pattern of living a continual reminder that they were God's people.

To understand the content of Leviticus it is essential to consider the theological background of Israel as a nation. To bring Israel's theological setting into focus, let us consider the patriarchal promise, Israel's redemption out of Egypt, the covenantal agreement, the Tabernacle, and the priesthood.

THE PATRIARCHAL PROMISE

God's promise to Israel began with Abraham, through whose descendants all the nations of the earth were to be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). With that promise came the assurance that in the future they would, as a nation, occupy the land of Canaan. As the Israelites under Joseph settled in Egypt, the hope of returning to the land promised to them was kept alive from generation to generation by an oath that the bones of Joseph would be transferred to Canaan when God fulfilled His promise to them (Gen. 50:22-26; cf. also Heb. 11:22).

Generations later, the Israelites were oppressed by the Egyptians in whose land they lived. Under enslavement and oppression, Moses was born, cared for and influenced by his mother, and reared and educated in the court of Pharaoh. Under his mother he undoubtedly became aware of the promises God had made to the patriarchs, and he chose to identify himself with his fellow Israelites instead of the Egyptians (Ex. 2:11-23; cf. Heb. 11:24-26). When God called Moses to deliver Israel, He identified Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and declared that He would fulfill His promise of bringing the Israelites into their own land (Ex. 3:6-9).

REDEMPTION OF ISRAEL

Although the enslaved Israelites had appealed to God for

help on the basis of the patriarchal promises, they had not seen any evidence of divine power displayed on their behalf. Instead they continued to live under oppressive Egyptian pharaohs of the New Kingdom era, whose power was unchallenged in the Fertile Crescent.

But God was concerned about their oppression (Ex. 2:23-25). In carrying out His plan to free the Israelites from Egyptian oppression and to guide them to the Promised Land, God involved Moses (Ex. 3:1-10). Through Moses God provided the conditions and circumstances that gave the Israelites a basis on which to exercise their faith in God.

How did God reveal himself to the Israelites? Moses anticipated that the Israelites would not believe that God had appeared to him at the burning bush (Ex. 4:1), so God endowed him with two miraculous signs. When the Israelites saw those signs and accepted Moses and Aaron as messengers of God, “they believed” and “bowed down and worshiped” (Ex. 4:31).

God’s power was subsequently demonstrated to the Israelites as well as to the Egyptians in the course of ten plagues. God’s power was displayed so that the Israelites would “know that I am the LORD your God” by bringing them out of Egypt (Ex. 6:7). The plagues were “mighty acts of judgment” so that the Egyptians would “know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it” (Ex. 7:4-5).

The final plague required the Israelites to observe the first Passover celebration. Prepared for departure—“with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand”—they were to eat the Lord’s Passover feast (Ex. 12:11). Believing the instructions God gave through Moses, the Israelites, under the leadership of the elders, did as instructed and observed the Passover in an attitude of worship and faith in God (Ex. 12:27-28; cf. Heb. 11:27-28).

As they left Egypt, God’s presence with them was miraculously manifested in a “pillar of cloud to guide them” and

a “pillar of fire to give them light” (Ex. 13:20-22). When the Israelites were endangered by the pursuing Egyptian army, the pillar of cloud barred the enemy from overtaking them (Ex. 14:19-20), and a way through the Red Sea miraculously was made for the Israelites, whereas the Egyptians perished in its waters.

As the Israelites witnessed God’s mighty power displayed in their redemption, they “feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant” (Ex. 14:31). In that historic deliverance the Israelites learned of God’s loving concern for their suffering as slaves of the powerful Egyptians. In contrast to the divine judgment meted out to the Egyptians, the Israelites were favored by God’s mercy and grace, through which salvation was provided for them. Seeing the miraculous signs, the Israelites responded in faith and obedience. They learned to identify themselves as God’s people, ones who served a living, powerful God instead of the Egyptians.

THE COVENANT

En route to Mount Sinai the Israelites experienced God’s providential care. Water, manna, and quails were supplied in abundance, and the attacking Amalekites were defeated.

At Mount Sinai the covenant between God and the Israelites, who already had a faith in God (Ex. 4:31; 14:31), was established. God now reconfirmed His patriarchal covenant with the nation of Israel (Ex. 19-24).

The covenant was established on the basis of God’s love and grace. It has the same literary form as other ancient Near Eastern texts in which a suzerain imposed his terms and laws on the vassal. Usually in suzerain-vassal treaties, the suzerain made a treaty with the vassal whom he had conquered.⁴ God, however, did not conquer Israel. God extended His love for the patriarchs to the Israelites and redeemed them from the

4. Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 20-24.

power of Pharaoh (Deut. 7:7-8; 9:4-6). God's graciousness in this covenantal relationship was unique to the faith of Israel. God did not send Moses to the Israelites with the law and require them to accept it in order to be delivered from slavery. On the contrary, He redeemed Israel in an act of love and grace and brought her to Mount Sinai before the law was revealed to her. Note the law's opening words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). God's grace and mercy preceded the law.

God's purpose in choosing and redeeming Israel as His "treasured possession" was that she would be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5-6). The laws and stipulations He gave the Israelites were to help them live as His holy people. The Ten Commandments and the rest of the revelatory material in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers were a working out of the relationship between God and His people, who were to reflect His holiness in daily life.

Obedience to these laws and regulations was a normal response to God's love, and God assured the Israelites that He would continue "showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:6). Keeping God's commandments required exclusive devotion to and worship of God. In Egypt, enneads of gods were worshiped, some dating back more than a thousand years. But God's people were to worship Him alone. The seriousness of rupturing the covenant of exclusive worship was demonstrated when severe judgment was meted out to the Israelites when they worshiped the golden calf (Ex. 32-33), after which the covenant was renewed.

To underline the graciousness of this covenant, we should emphasize that the Israelites were not God's covenant people because they obeyed the law. They had been God's people before the law was given. The instructions for holy living delineated in the book of Leviticus were prescribed for the Israelites so that they might know how to live as God's people.

As the recipients of God's redemptive love, the Israelites were to have an attitude of humility and gratitude and a sincere interest in conforming to God's laws out of love for Him. The legalistic conformity that later developed was a distortion of obedience in that it lacked the proper response of love.

THE TABERNACLE

The Tabernacle is central in a proper understanding of the material in Leviticus. It was the focal point of the sacrificial rituals, the institution and ministry of the priesthood, and various religious observances.⁵

After the covenant was confirmed on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19-24), God instructed Moses to "make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them" (Ex. 25:8). In Egypt, the Israelites had been made aware of God's care for them through Moses' delivering His message, confirmed by two miracles (Ex. 4:29-31), and they were shown God's power through the plagues, which climaxed in their exodus from Egypt. The pillar of cloud was a visible manifestation of God's presence hovering over them as they left Egypt, and it guided them to Mount Sinai. With the covenant established, God's presence was to be more concretely portrayed by a Tabernacle in the midst of their camp.

In contrast to the Egyptians, who had built many temples, the Israelites were to erect only one place of worship. Whereas the Egyptians served and ministered to the gods they had made, the Israelites worshiped one God, the God who had demonstrated that He was more powerful than Pharaoh and all the gods of Egypt.

When the Tabernacle was completed and dedicated, it was covered by the cloud of God's presence and filled with His glory (Ex. 40:34-48). Through that cloud's hovering over the Tabernacle God provided guidance for encampment, and its

5. See Samuel J. Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks*, 3d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 57-74 for a summary of Israel's religion.

movement provided guidance for the wilderness journey (Num. 9:15-23; 10:33-34; Deut. 31:15).

In interpreting the rules and regulations for cleanliness in everyday life, one should keep in mind the reality of God's dwelling with Israel in the Tabernacle in the center of the camp. The Israelites' behavior was to be constantly tempered by the fact that they were in the presence of God.

The Tabernacle and later the Temple, which were dwelling places for God, were ultimately destroyed, and the glory of God departed. The apostle John, however, recognized centuries later that God was once more dwelling among men in the Person of Jesus, who tabernacled, or "lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John. 1:14).

THE PRIESTHOOD

For the Tabernacle to function as God's dwelling place in the camp of Israel, it was essential to have individuals charged with the responsibility of leading in the worship of God. For that important aspect of Israel's religion, God instructed Moses to ordain Aaron and his sons to serve as priests (Ex. 28:1; 29:44-46). The priests were to represent God before the people and to represent the people before God in order to maintain the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

References to priests who did not belong to the descendants of Abraham are intriguing. In patriarchal times Melchizedek, king of Salem, was identified as "priest of God Most High" (Gen. 14:18). In Egypt Joseph married the daughter of the priest of On (Gen. 41:45; 46:20). Priests who were land-owners were given special recognition in Joseph's administrative policy (Gen. 47:22, 26). Moses married Ziporah, the daughter of Jethro, a Midianite priest who offered sacrifices in praise to God for Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 18:9-12). Before Mosaic times, offerings to God were usually made by heads of families, as exemplified by Noah (Gen. 8:20-21) and Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:4, 18; 22:1-13).

Very likely the priests in Israel until this time (Ex. 19:22) were heads of families, who, with the elders (Ex. 4:29), were responsible leaders who represented the Israelites in religious and civic affairs.

Moses' divine call to be a leader of Israel was confirmed through the Exodus. He represented God to the Israelites as well as to the Egyptians. He also represented the Israelites before God.

In the covenant established at Mount Sinai (Ex. 20-24), Moses was instructed to appoint Aaron, his sons Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders to represent the Israelites in worship. Moses, however, also functioned as priest in building an altar, offering sacrifices, reading the Book of the Covenant to the Israelites, and sprinkling "the blood of the covenant" on the people as they made their commitment of obedience to God (Ex. 24:3-8).

After the covenant was ratified, God gave Moses detailed instructions for the erection of the Tabernacle as His dwelling place in the camp of Israel (Ex. 25-27). Aaron and his sons, as priests, were to be robed in elaborately prepared garments (Ex. 28-30). In a seven-day ceremony, the priesthood was to be instituted and consecrated, and the Tabernacle and all its furniture were to be dedicated as a dwelling place for God among His chosen people (Ex. 40:1-38).

Although the priesthood in Israel began with Moses (Ex. 24), it was Aaron and his sons who were given divine authority to be the priests in Israel (Ex. 28:1). Dressed in special official robes (Ex. 28:4-39, Lev. 8:7-9), Aaron was unique as the anointed high priest (Ex. 29:7), and when he died, the office was passed on to his son Eleazar (Num. 20:25-28). Because Aaron was a Levite, the Israelite priesthood resided in the tribe of Levi.

After the Israelites were redeemed out of Egypt, the firstborn son in every family was to be consecrated to God (Ex. 13:2; 22:29; 34:18-20), since they had been spared when the firstborn sons among the Egyptians were slain. During the year of encampment, a census was taken (Num. 2:32; cf. also

Ex. 38:26), and the Levites took the place of the firstborn sons as they ministered in the service of the sanctuary (Num. 3:5-13).

To understand the book of Leviticus properly, it is essential to realize how vital the role of the priests was in the life of Israel. Since Israel as a nation had a unique covenantal relationship with God, the priesthood and its ministrations were of the highest priority. The priests served as mediators, representatives between God and the Israelites, to preserve that unique divine-human relationship. Although the covenant relationship with God had been established through Moses' acting as mediator and priest, the Aaronic priesthood was charged with maintaining that covenant as a living reality in the life of the Israelites.

The priests were at all times to be conscious of God's presence in the Tabernacle. They represented a holy God in the midst of a nation that was to be holy. It was crucially important for them to exercise meticulous care in daily living a holy life.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

The Israelites had become aware of God's presence in a new way in Egypt. For years they had suffered as slaves and prayed for deliverance as the Egyptian oppression intensified (Ex. 3:7-10). When Moses told the elders that God had commissioned him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land and performed two miracles before them, they responded in faith (Ex. 4:29-31). They witnessed the mighty acts of God during the ten plagues, and then, while marching out of Egypt, they literally saw God's presence in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21-22).

When the Egyptians were about to overtake them, God's visible presence in the cloud moved behind the Israelites and restrained the enemy forces. After the Israelites crossed the sea, in which the pursuing army was drowned, the Egyptians were made forcibly aware of God's presence, as God had assured Moses: "the Egyptians will know that I am the

LORD” (Ex. 14:4). The Israelites responded to the manifestation of God’s presence with reverence and faith in God and in Moses (Ex. 14:31).

En route to Mount Sinai the Israelites grumbled and were again made aware of God’s presence (Ex. 16:2-12). While Aaron was speaking to the Israelites, the glory of God appeared, and the Lord spoke to Moses. In response to their grumbling, God provided quail and manna so that “you will know that I am the LORD your God” (v. 12).

It was at that time that the Sabbath was introduced to the Israelites, to be observed. In response to God’s material provision for them each day, with a double portion on the sixth day and none on the seventh, they were to “bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath” (16:29). The Lord removed the necessity of gathering food on the seventh day and instructed His people to observe it as a “day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD” (16:23). Thus the Israelites were given every seventh day as a holy day in which they were to acknowledge the Lord’s presence in a special way.

At Rephidim, the Israelites lacked water and once more questioned, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Ex. 17:8). God again confirmed His presence with them as Moses struck a rock with his staff and tapped water in abundance for the Israelites.

As the Israelites were encamped at Mount Sinai, God continued to make His presence visible in the cloud (Ex. 19:9). Although He had already conveyed His message to the Israelites through Moses (Ex. 19:3-8), He now spoke to Moses from the cloud so that the people would “hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you” (19:9). After the Israelites had duly prepared themselves, God manifested His presence through thunder and lightning “and a very loud trumpet blast” so that “everyone in the camp trembled” (19:16). As “smoke billowed up” and “the whole mountain trembled violently” (v. 18), the Israelites heard the “voice of God speaking out of fire” (Deut. 4:33). That meeting with God culminated in the ratification of the covenant between

God and Israel (Ex. 20-24). Then Moses ascended the mountain as “the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai.” To the encamped Israelites “the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain” (Ex. 24:15-17). With the Israelites committed to be God’s covenant people, the first instruction He gave to Moses on the mountaintop was for the Israelites to “make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (Ex. 25:8).

When Moses returned from Mount Sinai after forty days, the Israelites had already broken their commitment to worship God exclusively (Ex. 32). Their defection was judged by a severe plague, in which thousands died, and God’s presence was withdrawn from Israel. When Moses realized that, he appealed to God, pleading that it was futile for him to lead the Israelites to Canaan without God’s presence (Ex. 33:12-16). Realizing that the uniqueness of Israel was God’s presence with them, Moses asked to see the glory of God—a greater revelation of God than he had experienced so far. God not only granted that request but also gave Moses assurance of the renewal of the covenant with Israel. After another forty-day period on the mountain, Moses returned to the camp of Israel with a radiant face, reflecting the reality of having been in the presence of God (Ex. 34). Immediately the Israelites contributed gifts and labor toward building a dwelling place for God.

When the Tabernacle was completed, Moses was commanded to erect it and put all its furniture in place (Ex. 40:1-8). In a seven-day ceremony, as the presence of God hovered above it, the Tabernacle and all its furnishings were anointed with oil, dedicated, and set apart for God. Likewise, Aaron and his sons, as well as their priestly garments, were sanctified and set apart for serving God, as Moses officiated in offering daily sacrifices. On the eighth day, Aaron officiated and blessed the people, and then Moses and Aaron entered the Tabernacle. When they came out to bless the people again, “the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed

the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar” (Lev. 9:23-24). That fire, a miraculous manifestation of God, consumed the sacrifice, climaxing the initiation of the dwelling of God in the Tabernacle.

The concept of Deity residing among people in a portable shrine was familiar to Near Eastern nations in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries B.C. It was normal for Egyptians to carry such a tent with them on military expeditions and erect it in the middle of the camp for worship. At that shrine, the leader was expected to obtain guidance and protection from the deity.

Unique to Israel, however, was the fact that their God, who had delivered them through His mighty acts, manifested His presence in fire and glory visible to the entire nation. Unique also was God’s communication, witnessed by the Israelites, to Moses at Mount Sinai and at the Tabernacle. God’s power, manifested in their deliverance from Egypt and daily provision of manna, and His presence in the Tabernacle assured them of the future supply of their spiritual and material needs, including the fulfillment of the promise that they would possess the land of Canaan.

The presence of God among His people is the key to understanding the book of Leviticus. God was present in every aspect of life, in the everyday mundane affairs as well as in religious concerns. God was living among them. The Tabernacle was His residence in Israel.

The sense of God’s presence, which permeates the entire book, is indicated forty-two times by the expression “before the LORD.” As the people brought their offerings and observed their feasts and seasons, they did it “before the LORD.” Eleven times they were reminded that their offerings were to be a soothing “aroma” to the Lord, reflecting as it were the physical presence of God. In addition, they were reminded to “rejoice before the LORD” (Lev. 23:40).

The solemn statement “I am the LORD” occurs forty-six times throughout Leviticus, identifying Israel’s God as the ever living, ever present One. Every aspect of daily life was af-

fectured by the reality of the presence of God. Both the Israelites and the Egyptians came to “know that I am the LORD” in a tangible way. The Israelites experienced God’s mercy in redemption (Ex. 6:7); the Egyptians were confronted with God’s power in judgment (Ex. 7:4-5). Now the Israelites were to apply the awareness of God’s presence in everyday life. Nothing in life, no matter how insignificant, could be considered beyond God’s presence with His people. The presence of God among them was the basis for holiness and holy living, and the book of Leviticus outlines the terms under which true worship was accepted by God.

SUMMARY

For a meaningful understanding of the book of Leviticus, one must consider its importance in the history of Israel. Although the bulk of its contents consists of priestly laws and instructions, the narrative section—chapters 8-10—provides a vital historical link between the books of Exodus and Numbers. Consequently those chapters are basic to our understanding of Leviticus in its historical context.

The inauguration of the priesthood, as the Tabernacle was dedicated as God’s dwelling place in the camp of Israel, was the climax of Israel’s encampment at Mount Sinai. Fewer than nine months had passed since they had arrived there (Ex. 19:1). After the covenant was established (Ex. 19-24), Moses ascended the mountain for forty days and received instructions for the building of the Tabernacle and its furniture, for making the priestly garments, for appointing the priesthood, and for dedicating the Tabernacle as God’s abode among His people (Ex. 25-31). Crucial was the interlude in which Israel’s apostasy precipitated divine judgment (Ex. 32-33). It was through Moses’ intercession that divine judgment upon the whole nation abated and the covenant bond was restored. After another forty-day period on Mount Sinai, Moses returned to supervise the building of the Tabernacle (Ex. 35-39), which was ready for erection on the first day of the second year after their departure from Egypt. The building of

the Tabernacle and the institution of the priesthood confirmed Israel as God's holy people.

In view of the climactic significance of the building of the Tabernacle, let us begin our study of Leviticus with chapters 8-10, as the framework in which to consider the priestly instructions in the rest of the book. Those instructions became meaningful and significant to the Israelites only after the Tabernacle had been erected and God actually began to live among them. The priesthood was ordained to minister on their behalf in the presence of God.