

Reading Through the Bible Week 7: Leviticus

God's Holiness: "Be Holy, for I am Holy"

Overview:

Leviticus is the third book of the Pentateuch, acting as a manual of holiness and priestly instructions given at Mount Sinai immediately after the construction of the Tabernacle in Exodus to enable a holy God to dwell among sinful people. It centers on sacrifices, purity laws, and the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), emphasizing that God's people must be "holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (19:2).

The Book of Leviticus (c. 1440–1400 BC) acts as a priestly manual and rulebook designed to teach the Israelites how to live in the presence of a holy God. It is structured symmetrically around the theme of holiness (19:2), dividing into rituals for approach (ch. 1-10), purity regulations (ch. 11-15), the central Day of Atonement (ch. 16-17), and practical holy living (ch. 18-27).

Leviticus acts as a bridge between Israel's redemption and their journey to the Promised Land and reveals that while God desires to dwell among His people, access to Him requires consecration and adherence to His holy standards, ultimately pointing toward the need for a perfect, final atonement.

Theme:

The primary theme of the Book of Leviticus is on the holiness of God and His subsequent call for His people to be holy. The book serves as a "manual on holiness," instructing Israel on how to maintain a relationship with a perfectly pure Creator while living in a fallen world.

The sub-themes – Rebellion vs. Fidelity, Divine Justice and Mercy, and Organization – within the book emphasize that holiness is not just a state of being, but a lifestyle of obedience, ritual observance, and ethical treatment of others, ultimately pointing towards the need for a perfect sacrifice.

Narrative Arc of Leviticus:

The book moves from the initiation of worship at the Tabernacle to instructions for maintaining the relationship with God in everyday life, acting as the spiritual and structural center of the Pentateuch.

- **The Problem:** The Israelites are at Mount Sinai, but their impurity and rebellion prevent them from living in God's presence.
- **The Solution (Chapters 1–15):** The introduction of sacrificial systems, the inauguration of the priesthood (Aaron), and purification rituals (laws of clean and unclean).
- **The Center (Chapter 16):** The Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) acts as the climax, providing a yearly, comprehensive cleansing for the nation.
- **The Result (Chapters 17–27):** Holiness codes are given, outlining how to live in practical holiness, including instructions for festivals, Sabbath years, and maintaining relationships, concluding with calls for obedience.
- **Narrative Interludes:** Specific events punctuate the laws, such as the inauguration of the priesthood and the death of Nadab and Abihu (ch. 8-10), highlighting the severity of divine holiness.

Key Study Points:

- **Access to God via Sacrifices** (Chapters 1–7)
- **The Priesthood** (Chapters 8–10)
- **Purity and Cleanness Laws** (Chapters 11–15)
- **The Day of Atonement** (Chapters 16–17)
- **The Holiness Code** (Chapters 18–27)



Study Points & Commentary

The Book of Leviticus is often viewed as a complex rulebook, but its systematic breakdown reveals a highly intentional, symmetrical structure focused on how a sinful people can live in the presence of a holy God. Leviticus is considered foundational for understanding the rest of the Bible, particularly the New Testament, as it frames the concept of holiness, the need for sacrifice, and the role of a mediator, which are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

1. Symmetrical (Chiasmic) Structure

This symmetrical structure, known as a chiasm (a "ring of rings" structure), is essential for understanding the Book of Leviticus. In ancient Near Eastern literature, the most important point isn't at the end, it is in the dead center.

The book of Leviticus is meticulously structured as a seven-part chiasm (A-B-C-X-C'-B'-A') that mirrors the geography of the Tabernacle itself—moving from the outer courtyard into the Holy of Holies. This design reveals that Leviticus is not a random list of rules, but a structural map of sacred space as well as serving a theological purpose to demonstrate how a holy God can dwell among sinful people.

The symmetrical design functions as a journey:

A = Sacrifices/Offerings (Chapters 1–7) - Outer Ring

B = Priests Inauguration (Chapters 8–10)

C = Purity Laws (Chapters 11–15)

X = The Day of Atonement (Chapter 16) - Center Heart

C' = Purity Regulations (Chapters 17–20)

B' = Priestly Regulations (Chapters 21–24)

A' = Vows/Redemption (Chapters 25–27) - Outer Ring

a. The Outer Ring: Approach and Ritual (Lev. 1-7 & 23-27)

These sections correspond to the Outer Court of the Tabernacle. They deal with the community's relationship with God through outward ritual. The mirroring shows that regular sacrifices (ch. 1-7) enable the sanctified life (ch. 23-27). True worship isn't just what happens at the altar; it's how we manage our calendars and our debts.

- 1) **A - The Sacrificial System (ch. 1–7):** Defines how sinful humanity approaches a holy God. It outlines the five main offerings (burnt, grain, peace, sin, guilt).
- 2) **A' - The Calendar and Vows (ch. 23–27):** Sets the rhythm of holy time (feasts, Sabbath) and vows. While the first ring focuses on ritual (how to sacrifice), this ring focuses on rhythm (how to live in time).

b. The Outer-Mid Ring: The Mediators (Lev. 8-10 & 21-22)

This corresponds to the Holy Place. The structure highlights the responsibility of the mediator: they cannot bring strange fire (ch. 10) nor act casually with holy things (ch. 21-22). These sections sandwich the book to show that leadership carries a higher weight of accountability.



- 1) **B - Consecration of Priests (8–10):** Aaron and his sons are ordained, followed by the tragic death of Nadab and Abihu (10), reinforcing that priests must treat God's holiness with reverence.
 - 2) **B' - Priestly Standards (21–22):** Specific rules for priests regarding marriage, blemishes, and handling holy offerings.
- c. The Inner Ring: Purity and Ethics (Lev. 11-15 & 18-20)**
 These mirror each other to distinguish between *ritual* purity (11-15) and *moral* purity (18-20). The message is that inward "purity" must match outward "holiness."
- 1) **C - Laws of Purity (ch. 11–15):** Dietary laws (ch. 11), childbirth (ch. 12), skin diseases (ch. 13), and bodily discharges (ch. 15).
 - 2) **C' - Ethical Holiness (Code of Holiness) (ch. 18–20):** Sexual morality (ch. 18), moral/social laws (ch. 19), and punishment for violations (ch. 20).
- d. The Center Heart: The Day of Atonement (Lev. 16-17)**
 The Holy of Holies. It is the "lynchpin" or "pivot" of the entire book:
- **The Message:** Total restoration is only possible through blood atonement (17:11).
 - **The Mirroring:** The entire book moves toward this event (1–15) and unfolds from it (18–27).
- X - Day of Atonement & Blood (16–17):** The heart of the book. The High Priest enters the Most Holy Place, offering atonement for the entire nation, taking sin away via the scapegoat.

2. Systematic Subdivisions

The 27 chapters of Leviticus are typically divided into two primary halves: the **Priestly Code** (chapters 1–16) focused on ritual purity, and the **Holiness Code** (chapters 17–27) focused on moral and social behavior.

a. The Priestly Code (Chapters 1-16)

The Priestly Code in Leviticus (Chapters 1–16) functions as a manual for maintaining covenant relationship for a holy God to dwell among sinful people by focusing on atonement and purity through sacrifices, ordained priesthood, dietary/hygiene laws, and the Day of Atonement. It outlines the structural and ritualistic mechanisms for atonement, purity, and worship, transitioning from the construction of the Tabernacle to its daily, active operation:

- **Theocratic Context:** Leviticus 1:1 sets the stage: "The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting." The laws are not arbitrary rules but divine instructions (Torah) for maintaining a covenant relationship.
 - **Structure is Theology:** The book is structured to move from the outer court (sacrifices) to the inner sanctuary (priesthood) to the Holy of Holies (Atonement).
 - **Holiness Paradigm:** The foundational principle is **Leviticus 19:2**: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Holiness (*qodesh*) means being set apart, and purity (*tahor*) means being fit for God's presence.
 - **Symbolic Interpretation:** Rituals are "enacted parables." For example, the fat and blood symbolize life, which belongs to God (Lev 17:11).
- 1) **Sacrificial Laws (1–7):** These chapters establish the "syntax of sacrifice," where physical rituals represent spiritual realities. The term for offering, *qorban*, literally means "to bring near," signifying the restoration of fellowship. Chapters 1-7 details five main types of offerings: burnt, grain, peace, sin, and guilt offerings.



- a) **Hermeneutics:** These chapters provide ritual instructions from two perspectives: the offerer (layperson) in 1–5 and the priests in 6–7. The central theme is *kippur* (atonement), making the worshiper clean and acceptable to God. The blood represents "life for life" (Lev. 17:11), and the "pleasing aroma" indicates God's acceptance of the substitutionary sacrifice.
 - b) **Theology: The Five Offerings:**
 - **Burnt Offering (*Olah*, ch. 1):** Entirely consumed, signifying total consecration and atonement for the worshiper's general state of sinfulness. It symbolizes total surrender to God.
 - **Grain Offering (*Minchah*, ch. 2):** A tribute of gratitude, often accompanying other sacrifices. It is a recognition of God's provision.
 - **Peace Offering (*Shelamim*, ch. 3):** A fellowship meal shared between God, priest, and worshiper, symbolizing reconciliation. A fellowship meal celebrating reconciliation.
 - **Sin/Purification Offering (*Chattat*, 4:1–5:13):** Removes the pollution of sin from the sanctuary, rather than just forgiving the sinner. A purification from the "stain" of unintentional sin.
 - **Guilt/Reparation Offering (*Asham*, 5:14–6:7):** Covers sins against the holy things of God or neighbor, requiring restitution plus a penalty. Restitution for specific violations against holy things.
 - c) **Theophany:** The sacrifice is "accepted on his behalf to make atonement" (Lev. 1:4), suggesting a mediated presence of God who receives the offering. The system culminates in Leviticus 9:23–24, where the glory of the Lord appears and divine fire consumes the offering, marking God's public acceptance of the sacrificial system.
- 2) **The Priesthood (8–10):** Describes the ordination of Aaron and his sons and the tragic death of Nadab and Abihu for offering "unauthorized fire".
 - a) **Hermeneutics:** This section is narrative-legal, demonstrating the implementation of the laws given in Exodus 28–29. It contrasts the authorized, orderly ordination with the subsequent, chaotic disobedience.
 - b) **Theology:** "By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy" (Lev 10:3). God's presence demands strict obedience, not innovative, "man-centered" worship.
 - **Ordination (ch. 8-9):** Aaron and his sons are set apart, blood applied to their right ears, thumbs, and toes, symbolizing the dedication of their senses and actions to God.
 - **Crisis: "Unauthorized Fire" (ch. 10):** Nadab and Abihu offered "unauthorized fire" (*esh zarah*—profane, strange, or uncommanded). They bypassed divine commands, demonstrating self-will rather than obedient worship. This act—likely using common coals rather than sacred fire from the altar, potentially while intoxicated—demonstrated severe irreverence and disobedience, emphasizing that God requires worship according to His specific instructions, not human innovation.
 - **Holiness:** God's glory demands strict reverence: "Among those who approach me I will be proved holy" (Lev. 10:3, NIV).



- c) **Theophany:** A paradoxical, terrifying display of divine holiness—both approving (9:24) and consuming (10:2). After the ordination, "fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering" (Lev. 9:24), validating the sacrifice. In contrast, that same fiery presence destroys the disobedient sons (Lev. 10:2), highlighting that God's presence is both blessing and danger.
- 3) **Laws of Purity (11–15):** Rules regarding clean and unclean animals (diet), childbirth, skin diseases (leprosy), and bodily discharges.
- a) **Hermeneutics:** These laws (dietary in 11, childbirth in 12, diseases in 13–14, and bodily discharges in 15) define the boundary between the holy and the common, the clean and the unclean. "Unclean" does not strictly mean "sinful," but rather "not fit for the sanctuary".
- **Dietary Laws (11):** Clean animals have split hooves and chew cud (like sheep/cattle); unclean animals (like pigs) are "mixtures" or chaotic.
 - **Childbirth (12):** A woman is unclean after childbirth, not because it is sinful, but due to the loss of blood, which symbolizes a "lessening of life".
 - **Skin Disease/Leprosy (13–14):** *Tsara'ath* (skin disease) is a "death-like" state, requiring isolation (13:46).
 - **Bodily Discharges (15):** Regulations concerning reproductive fluids (semen, menstrual blood), emphasizing that such discharges cannot be brought into the Tabernacle.
- b) **Theology:**
- **Holiness in Daily Life:** God's people must be holy because He is holy (Lev. 11:44–45).
 - **Containment of Mortality:** Purity is not about hygiene, but about symbolic "wholeness." Impurity (*teme'*) laws deal with, and a condition of, contact with death, decay, or "leakage of life" (blood, semen), which are antithetical to a God who is pure life.
 - **The Goal:** To prevent the defilement of the Tabernacle, so God can continue to dwell in their midst (Lev. 15:31).
- 4) **The Day of Atonement (16):** The central ritual of the book where the High Priest purifies the Tabernacle and the people's sins.
- a) **Hermeneutics:** This chapter serves as the climax of the first half of Leviticus, providing a comprehensive, annual, national atonement for the accumulated sins that were not covered by daily sacrifices.
- b) **Theology:** *Yom Kippur* is the annual cleansing of the sanctuary, the priesthood, and the people from sins not covered by daily sacrifices.
- **The Ritual:** The High Priest enters the Holy of Holies with blood, the only time each year, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat to purge the tabernacle of impurity.
 - **The Two Goats:** One goat is sacrificed for the purification of the sanctuary, while the other is the "scapegoat" (*Azazel*), onto which the High Priest confesses and transfers all of Israel's sins, driving them away into the wilderness (Lev. 16:21–22).
 - **Divine Disposal:** This acts as a symbolic, yet highly effective, removal of impurity and sin from the community.



- c) **Theophany:** The High Priest enters behind the veil, where the cloud of incense covers the atonement cover (mercy seat), protecting him from death in the immediate presence of God.

In summary, the Priestly Code, primarily found in Leviticus 1–16 (with surrounding material in Exodus and Numbers), serves as a detailed, structured manual for Israel’s worship, ritual purity, and priestly conduct at the Tabernacle.

Set at Mount Sinai, these chapters provide the foundational framework for how a holy God can dwell among a sinful people. The narrative moves from the technicalities of sacrifice to the establishment of the priesthood, and finally to the laws of purification that culminate in the annual Day of Atonement.

b. **The Holiness Code (Chapters 17-27)**

This section shifts the focus from the sanctuary to the community, emphasizing moral and social behavior as a mirror of God's character. It serves as the climax of the book of Leviticus, transitioning from the ritual purity laws for priests (chapters 1-16) to the practical application of holiness for all Israel. It is fundamentally defined by the divine mandate: "Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:44, 19:2).

- 1) **Practical Holiness (17–22):** This section translates theology into daily conduct, emphasizing that holy living is actionable. They are guidelines for moral living, including sexual conduct and the famous command to "love your neighbor as yourself" in Chapter 19.
 - a) **Sacredness of Life (17):** Prohibitions against consuming blood or eating unbled meat (17:10-14).
 - b) **Sexual Morality (18, 20):** Detailed restrictions on incest, adultery, homosexuality, and bestiality, framing them as practices of Egypt and Canaan that pollute the land (18:3, 20:23).
 - c) **The Ethical Core (19):** Known as the "Little Decalogue," this chapter connects ritual ("keep my Sabbaths," 19:3) with social ethics ("love your neighbor as yourself," 19:18; leaving gleanings (surplus or unharvested crops from fields) for the poor, 19:9-10).
 - d) **Priestly Integrity (21-22):** Standards for priests, ensuring those who approach the holy are not defiled.
- 2) **Feasts and Seasons (23–25):** This section structures time around holiness, ensuring that daily life is interrupted by divine encounters. The sacred calendar (Passover, Pentecost, Atonement, Tabernacles) and the Sabbatical and Jubilee years.
 - a) **The Sabbath (23:3):** The foundation of all holy time.
 - b) **The Seven Feasts (23):** Passover (deliverance), Unleavened Bread (sanctification), Firstfruits (*Yom HaBikkurim* – trust), Pentecost (thanksgiving), Trumpets, Day of Atonement (purification), and Tabernacles (dependence).
 - c) **The Sabbatical and Jubilee Years (25):** The seventh year (rest for land) and 50th year (freedom for slaves, return of property) act as a reset button, preventing permanent poverty and reflecting God’s justice.
- 3) **Blessings, Curses, and Vows (26–27):** These chapters serve as the legal covenantal conclusion. Concluding promises include obedience and warnings for rebellion, plus regulations on dedicated property.



- a) **Blessings (26:1-13):** Promising agricultural abundance, peace, and the abiding presence of God for obedience.
 - b) **Curses (26:14-46):** Warning of famine, disease, war, and exile for breaking the covenant. It emphasizes that rebellion is not just social failure, but a breaking of the relationship with God.
 - c) **Vows and Tithes (27):** Regulations for dedicating persons, animals, or land to the Lord, affirming that all things ultimately belong to Him.
- 4) **Hermeneutics: The Logic of Imitation**
 The interpretive key to the Holiness Code is the principle of *Imitatio Dei* (Imitation of God): "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2).
- a) **Separation and Distinctiveness:** The term for "holy" (*qadosh*) literally means "set apart". Hermeneutically, these laws served to distinguish Israel from the surrounding Canaanite and Egyptian cultures, preventing assimilation through distinct diet, dress, and conduct.
 - b) **Structural Integration:** Unlike the first half of Leviticus, which focuses on priestly rituals, the Holiness Code addresses the "laity," democratizing holiness. It intersperses "ritual" laws (like not wearing mixed fabrics) with "moral" laws (like caring for the poor), suggesting that God does not separate the spiritual from the secular.
- 5) **Theology: God's Presence in the Community**
 The theology of the Holiness Code centers on the **Sanctification of Life**. The core theology is that God's presence is not limited to the holy of holies; it radiates out, making the entire camp of Israel a sacred space.
- a) **The Relational Heart:** "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18)—is the theological peak of the code. It frames holiness not as an abstract state, but as active justice, fairness, and compassion.
 - b) **The Covenantal Refrain:** The frequent repetition of "I am the LORD" (occurring 47 times in these chapters) acts as a divine signature, grounding every social law in God's own character and authority.
 - c) **The Land as Holy Space:** The land itself is considered sacred. Laws regarding the **Sabbatical** and **Jubilee** years (ch. 25) emphasize that the land belongs to God; the Israelites are merely tenants.
- 6) **Theophany: The Manifestation of the Holy**
 While a "theophany" is a visible appearance of God, the Holiness Code presents a **Mediated Theophany** through the community and its rituals. The theophany in these chapters is not a singular, visible manifestation (like Mt. Sinai), but rather a "functional" theophany—God inhabits the space that the people "set apart" for Him through obedience.
- a) **The Presence in Time:** The sacred calendar in Chapter 23 (Passover, Pentecost, Atonement) creates "theophanic moments" where the community collectively encounters God's presence through rhythmic participation in His redemptive history.
 - b) **The Presence in Ethics:** Treating a disabled person with dignity (Lev 19:14) or an alien with love (Lev 19:34) is treated as an encounter with God: "I am the Lord your God".
 - c) **The Presence in Judgment (Blessings and Curses):** Chapter 26, a "covenant enforcement" chapter, describes the theophany of God. Obedience brings rain, peace, and God's presence



walking among them (theophany of divine presence)) while disobedience brings desolation and exile, depending on the people's obedience to the covenant.

- d) **The Presence in Vows and Dedications (Ch. 27):** Vows of Persons (vv. 1–8): Individuals could vow their own service or that of family members to the Lord, often serving at the sanctuary. Specific silver valuations were set based on age and gender, reflecting agricultural productivity rather than personal worth. A provision for the poor allowed priests to reduce these values.

Regulations on redeeming or consecrating people, animals, or houses to the Lord:

- **Vows of Persons (v. 1–8):** Individuals could vow their own service or that of family members to the Lord, often serving at the sanctuary. Specific silver valuations were set based on age and gender, reflecting agricultural productivity rather than personal worth. A provision for the poor allowed priests to reduce these values.
- **Vows of Animals (v. 9–13):** Animals dedicated to God could not be exchanged. If a clean animal (fit for sacrifice) was vowed, it belonged to the Lord. Unclean animals were valued by the priest and could be redeemed by the owner adding 20% to the value.
- **Vows of Houses and Land (v. 14–25):** Houses dedicated to God could be redeemed for a price set by the priest plus 20%. Land valuations were based on the amount of seed required for sowing, not just acreage, and were adjusted based on the proximity to the Year of Jubilee.
- **Devoted Things and Tithes (v. 26–34):** Anything "devoted" (set apart entirely for God, often in judgment) could not be redeemed. The chapter concludes by reinforcing that all tithes of the land (seed, fruit, herds) are holy to the Lord and cannot be redeemed, though a 20% penalty applies if a person buys back part of their tithe.

In summary, The Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-27) teaches that God's holiness is not meant to be feared from a distance but imitated in the mundane aspects of life. It bridges the gap between sacred and secular, calling for a comprehensive righteousness that includes the heart, the home, the land, and the community.

The Holiness Code (Leviticus 17–27) represents the pinnacle of the Priestly material in the Old Testament, providing a comprehensive guide for living a "set apart" life in covenant with God. While the first half of Leviticus focuses on how to approach a holy God (ritual), the second half focuses on maintaining that fellowship in daily life (conduct).

