

TABERNACLE AND CREATION

Making sense of the Levitical system. by Jason Overman

Raise your hand if Leviticus is your favorite book in the Bible. . . . *Anyone?*

My friend Betty once told me that she had decided to read the Bible from cover to cover. A few months later I asked her how she was doing, and she confessed with some frustration that her project had been derailed. What happened? Well, Leviticus happened.

Many succumb to the minutia of Leviticus. Its detail of priestly ritual, service, and sacrifice overwhelms even the best intentioned. So hard to read, much less understand. What hope is there of applying it to our lives?

While we may be tempted to just skip this part of the Bible, we are encouraged to live “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4). Since the phrase “and the LORD spoke” appears dozens of times in Leviticus, perhaps it is a word worth hearing in the church today.

Holy and priestly

Among the kingdoms and nations of the world, Israel was unique – “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). What is condensed here in a phrase, Leviticus unpacks in twenty-seven chapters. *Priests* and *holy*, appearing nearly four hundred times, are its heart and soul. The role of priesthood and the nature of holiness is what Leviticus is all about.

Israel must be a holy priesthood because her holy God has declared that He would set His tabernacle among His chosen people and walk among them (Leviticus 26:11, 12). The Creator of the universe desires to live with His people, to restore the intimacy of Eden, to walk among us as He did then. But in a sinful world, only a holy people can receive such a God into their midst and mediate this awesome Presence to the world. “You shall be holy; for I am holy” (11:44) simply names the basic condition of having God as a neighbor.

The key to understanding Leviticus is to recognize that it articulates a vision of life restored to its original order and purpose. As the fourth commandment shows, Israel is familiar with the story of Creation. She celebrates it even as she imitates her Creator by living in accordance with His seven-day rhythm of work and rest. The holiness she pursues is first mentioned and bound up in the beauty and harmony of that lost but longed-for world of Creation and Sabbath (Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Exodus 20:8-11). Leviticus points the way back.

The story of the tabernacle and its priesthood, from construction to function, is divinely directed in two great movements. From Sinai, God summons and Israel builds (Exodus 25–40). Later, from the sanctuary, God calls again and Israel worships (Leviticus 1–27). The patterns and themes of Creation inform it all.



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Holy construction

In *The Torah's Vision of Worship*, Samuel Balentine notes the many parallels between the tabernacle and Creation. God calls Moses up the mount; he waits six days, and God speaks the seventh (Exodus 24:16; Genesis 1:1, 2; 3). Then seven speeches outline the construction of the tabernacle, each beginning with the formula "And the LORD said to Moses" (Exodus 25:1; 30:11; 17, 22, 34; 31:1, 12; see also Genesis 1:3–2:3). And the seventh speech ends with a dialogue on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:12-17; Genesis 2:1-3).¹

The Spirit of God that commenced Creation moves again as Israel responds to God's direction (Genesis 1:2; Exodus 35:31). The "Let there be . . . and it was so" of Genesis is paralleled as the tabernacle is raised in seven stages, each ending with the phrase "as the LORD had commanded him [Moses]" (Exodus 40:19-32). The whole process concludes as Moses looks over all the work and blesses

it, just as God did in the beginning (Exodus 40:33; 39:32, 43; Genesis 1:31–2:4).²

Also, this three-tiered tabernacle (most holy, holy, and outer court) is a miniature cosmos (heaven, earth, and seas) that symbolically reenacts Creation itself.

Concerning such patterns, Terence Fretheim writes that with the tabernacle "a new creation comes into being." Here "is one spot in the midst of a world of disorder where God's creative, ordering work is completed according to the divine intention just as it was in the beginning."³

Holy worship

With the tabernacle complete, Leviticus turns from construction to function, outlining both the worship and ethics of a holy people who would sustain this new creation. It begins "Now the LORD called to Moses . . . Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD,

you shall bring your offering of the livestock . . ." (Leviticus 1:1, 2). The first time the Lord called was after Adam sinned (Genesis 3:9). Now God calls, not to judge but to invite to worship. The "any one" cited here is the Hebrew word 'adam, and the vehicle of worship is an offering – literally, a gift of food.

The first Adam distorted creation by selfishly taking and eating, but these 'adams are invited to ritually reenact and reverse that sad event by selflessly giving, not eating. Since food corresponds to life, these gifts represent the givers' total and thankful dedication to God. This commitment is symbolized by the shedding of blood, for "the life . . . is in the blood." When freely presented, these unblemished lives are a "sweet aroma" to the Lord (Leviticus 17:11; 1:3-9).

Five offerings outline Israel's sacrificial worship: burnt, grain, peace, sin, and guilt. The first three are voluntary and express joy, thanksgiving, and fellowship; they ritually *sustain* communion



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between creation and Creator. The last two offerings are required and address sin, atonement, and forgiveness; they ritually restore communion between creation and Creator. Together, these sacrifices specify the worship necessary to participate in the life of God. Only sacrificial lives can uphold and advance this new creation.

Again, patterns of seven emerge frequently in priestly ritual. The entire sacrificial system unfolds in seven speeches (Leviticus 1–7). The ritual for animal sacrifice calls for seven acts (1:3-9). Priestly ordination follows seven steps over seven days (8:1-36). Blood is sprinkled

seven times to effect atonement and purification (4:6; 16:14). And Israel’s sacred and agricultural calendars contain cycles of seven festivals (two of them seven days long) and seven holy convocations over seven months (23:1-44; ch. 25).

Reflecting on the overall message of the tabernacle and its priesthood, Balentine writes:

. . . the Torah conceives the community of faith as empowered to create a ritual world of space, time, and status that mirrors God’s cosmic designs. . . . It is not just that the tabernacle and its rituals correspond to God’s created order. The Torah also understands Israel’s ritual world to

have the capacity to sustain and, if necessary, to restore God’s design for creation.⁴

Holy living

Beyond its ritual world (Leviticus 1–16), the priesthood also promotes an ethical world (17–27). The great command “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18) is a familiar example and a good summary of the priesthood’s unrelenting commitment to pursuing justice and mercy in the community of faith. The Ten Commandments are all reiterated in chapter 19 as well.

A central duty of the priesthood is teaching Israel how to “distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean” (10:10). Dividing and separating — establishing boundaries — is characteristic of Creator and creation (Genesis 1). Israel is called to discern and honor divine distinctions in every aspect of life. The theological rationale for this holiness is simply expressed in the words “for I am the LORD” (over forty-five times between chapters 11 and 27).

The words *holy* and *unclean* are polar opposites. Uncleanliness signifies anything that contradicts God’s holy nature. It comprehends both physical and moral conditions that reflect disorder or defilement of His original creation. For instance, a man with leprosy (13:3) and a man who has committed adultery (18:20) are both unclean (defiled) but for obviously different reasons: One is the victim of sickness, the other has willfully sinned.

Physical uncleanliness (chapters 11-15) relates to issues of disease, suffering, and death. These

distortions of Eden's intentions — evidence of the curse — are to be diagnosed and handled with caution. Moral uncleanness (18–20), relating to issues of deviant sexuality and worship, is much more serious. It is to be abhorred and fully rejected.

Whether sin or sickness, the priesthood is concerned to confront and contain anything that would trespass divine boundaries of creational order. While sickness and sin are addressed in different ways, they are fundamentally connected, both attesting to the fallen human condition. While sin is always condemned in a way that sickness is not, the priesthood and its ritual world seeks to remedy both, when possible, through atonement (chs. 5 and 16).

Christ and Christian

We cannot truly appreciate the life and work of Jesus or the church He created without recourse to the patterns and language of Leviticus. Every aspect of our journey through the tabernacle and its priesthood is taken up in His life. The New Testament is emphatic: Jesus embodies the ritual and ethical worlds that Leviticus discloses. The Word spoken so often there is made flesh in Christ, and that Word shapes the church:

- Jesus is the holy high priest and the tabernacle of God among men (Hebrews 7:26; John 1:14; 2:21), and His people are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, called with Israel to “Be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 2:9; 1:16).

- Jesus is the Lord of creation and Sabbath who worked and finished to restore the world to

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its intended glory (Colossians 1:16-20; Mark 2:28; John 5:17; 19:30; Galatians 6:15), and the Spirit of God is building us into a holy tabernacle that reflects this new creation to all (1 Corinthians 3:17; Ephesians 2:19-22).

- Jesus is the last Adam, the unblemished lamb, an offering of sweet aroma, the atonement and sacrifice for sin, the sprinkled blood (1 Corinthians 15:45; 1 Peter 1:19; Ephesians 5:2; Romans 5:6-11; Hebrews 10:10-22). In Him we become a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices, with bodies willingly presented as holy sacrifices (1 Peter 2:5; Romans 12:1).

- Jesus is the teacher who directs us to love the neighbor, to discern the holy from the unclean (Matthew 5–7; 23:23; Galatians 5:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:7). We share the good news of Him who reconciles sick and sinner alike, for in Christ the leper is cleansed and the adulterer is forgiven (Mark 2:17; Luke 5:12-24; John 8:4-11).

It is a long way from Leviticus to Christ, but perhaps not so far as we have thought. As we make the journey back, traversing the foreign landscape, we find that Jesus has preceded us. He has been there all along, speaking,

creating, and leading us back, and on, to Eden.

My friend Betty, 51, just died of cancer. I don't know if she ever finished Leviticus, but I do know that she embodied its hope. Despite her sin and sickness, she never failed to believe that her life was redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, that a new creation awaited her, and that her faithful high priest would present her holy and blameless before God her maker on that final day (Colossians 1:19-22).

Yes, in Jesus Christ, the ancient priesthood is everlasting after all! 

References

1. Samuel E. Balentine, *The Torah's Vision of Worship*, p. 138
2. *Ibid.*, p. 139
3. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 271
4. Balentine, p. 64

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