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Leviticus 1:1



THE LORD CALLED to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting. He said,

Original Meaning

LEVITICUS CONTINUES THE STORY of Israel's epic journey to freedom in the Promised Land of Canaan. It may be regarded as a literary unit that comprises a book, but it belongs to the larger whole of the five books of Moses (Genesis to Deuteronomy). While most of Leviticus consists of laws, beginning with instructions for sacrificial rituals to be performed at the sanctuary, this legislation is placed within a narrative framework that picks up where the story of Exodus ends.

According to Exodus 19:1, the Israelites came to the Sinai Desert in the third month after they left Egypt. At the end of this book the tabernacle was set up "on the first day of the *first* month in the second year" (40:17; emphasis supplied; cf. v. 2), that is, the second year after the Israelites had left Egypt. Numbers 1:1 begins exactly one month later—"on the first day of the *second* month of the second year" (emphasis supplied)—with the Israelites still in the Sinai Desert. So the basic chronological framework of the book of Leviticus, sandwiched between Exodus and Numbers, occupies only one month in the Sinai Desert.

We must allow for the possibility that some earlier and later materials may have been incorporated into Leviticus for topical reasons. Some instructions were delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai (7:38; 25:1; 26:46; 27:34), perhaps before the tabernacle was set up. Notice that Moses' last recorded trip up Mount Sinai was in Exodus 34. The blasphemer narrative, with its accompanying law-giving (Lev. 24:10–23), could have occurred at any time while the Israelites were camping in the desert. Even so, after the multi-millennial scope of Genesis and Exodus covering most of a century, Leviticus presents a mighty concentrated dose of divine revelation!

Confirming that Leviticus is intended as the next volume in a series, its first verse is a grammatical and structural continuation of the last few verses of Exodus. In Hebrew its first word is a *waw* consecutive form in which *waw* ("and") is prefixed to a verb meaning "call."¹ So we can render literally: "And he

1. Cf. 2 Kings 1:1, which also begins with a *waw* consecutive (imperfect) verb, thereby grammatically tying it to 1 Kings.

called...² It is true that an initial *waw* can simply be stylistic, without indicating that anything has gone before.³ However, real continuity in this case is confirmed by the fact that 1:1 completes a literary structure that begins in Exodus.

We discover the structure that binds Exodus and Leviticus together by looking for a parallel to the first three words of Leviticus: *wayyiqraʿ ʿel Mošeh* ("And he called to Moses"). This search is easy to execute with a Bible software program.⁴ The only other verse in the Hebrew Bible containing exactly the same words, including the same verb form, is Exodus 24:16: "and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD⁵ called to Moses [*wayyiqraʿ ʿel Mošeh*] from within the cloud." Here "the LORD" (*yhwh*, the personal name of Israel's God) calls to Moses from his glory cloud at the summit of Mount Sinai in order to give him directions for constructing the tabernacle and instituting its priesthood (Ex. 25–31). Similarly, in Leviticus 1:1 the Lord calls to Moses from the "Tent of Meeting" (i.e., the tabernacle) to communicate instructions for ritual activities to be performed at the tabernacle (Lev. 1–7). The parallel is striking.

The parallel becomes more striking if we take into account the verses immediately before Leviticus 1:1 (i.e., Ex. 40:34–38). At the very end of Exodus, after the tabernacle has been built according to plan and Moses has finished setting it up (chs. 35–40), the Lord's cloud covers it and his glory fills it. So the divine cloud and glory have moved from "settling" (*škn*) on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:16) to "settling" (40:35, also *škn*) over God's "tabernacle" (*miškan*, "place of settling/dwelling"⁶), in which the ark of the covenant contains a copy of the law proclaimed on Mount Sinai (25:16, 21; 40:20). This climactic moment signals a transition from one phase of Israel's story to the next.⁷

Now the sanctuary, rather than Mount Sinai, is the place of theophany and therefore the legislative capitol of the nation, from where the Lord calls to Moses. Because it is there, over the ark and between its two cherubim in the Most Holy Place, that the Lord promises to meet (Niphal of *yʿd*) with

2. Cf. Num. 1:1, lit., "And the LORD spoke." Ex. 1:1 also begins with "And," but it is not attached to a verb (see P. Enns, *Exodus* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 40). In such contexts at the beginnings of literary units, translators generally omit this "And" for the sake of good English style, thereby giving up the "hook" to that which goes before.

3. Esp. *waw* consecutive with the verb "to be": Josh. 1:1; Judg. 1:1; 1 Sam. 1:1, etc.

4. I am using Accordance, without which I would no longer dream of studying the Bible in any depth.

5. Heb. "he"; the NIV supplies "the LORD" here.

6. From the same root *škn*; see 40:35.

7. Enns, *Exodus*, 598–99.

Moses and give him commands for the Israelites (Ex. 25:22; cf. Num. 7:89), the sanctuary is called the "Tent of Meeting [*mo^ced*, also from root *y^cd*]" (Ex. 40:34–35; Lev. 1:1).

Now notice the way in which the section Exodus 40:34–Leviticus 1:1 parallels the order in Exodus 24:16:

The cloud covered [*ksb*] Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:16a)

And he [the LORD] called (*qr²*) to Moses (Ex. 24:16b)

The cloud covered [*ksb*] the "Tent of Meeting" (Ex. 40:34–38)

And he [the LORD] called [*qr²*] to Moses (Lev. 1:1)

This literary parallel is tight in that it involves repetition of specific Hebrew words (*ksb*, "cover"; *qr²*, "call") and a unique combination of words (*wayyiqra² ʿel Mošeh*, "And he called to Moses"). So Exodus 40:34–Leviticus 1:1 is clearly a structural unit that is meant to be read in light of Exodus 24:16. Now here is the punch line: the Exodus 40:34–Leviticus 1:1 unit *crosses the boundary between the two books and thus structurally binds them together*.

It is obvious that the rituals prescribed in Leviticus require the sanctuary that is described and set up in Exodus. However, the parallel that we have found between the introductions to instructions for (1) setting up the sanctuary and its priesthood (Ex. 25–31) and (2) performing sanctuary rituals (Lev. 1–7) shows that these two major bodies of legislation, seven chapters each, are placed in literary parallel to each other. This fact underlines the essential way in which their respective contents complement each other.⁸

Bridging Contexts

TRANSFORMATION. ISRAEL'S TRANSFORMATION from slaves to God's holy people is part of a larger saga that begins in Genesis with the stories of creation, the Flood, and God's promise to make of Abraham a great nation of countless descendants through whom he will reveal himself to the world as the Source of all blessing (Gen. 12:1–2; 15:5; 17:5–6; 22:17–18; 28:14).⁹ Where Leviticus ends, the book of Numbers carries on. So while the whole of Leviticus constitutes a book, it has an inter-

8. While the bulk of Ex. 25–31 is fulfilled in chs. 35–40, this does not include fulfillment of ch. 29 (consecration of the priesthood and sanctuary), which is delayed until Lev. 8. This relationship between Ex. 29 and Lev. 8 constitutes another important link between the two books.

9. See J. H. Walton, *Genesis* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 393–94, 401–4.

10. R. Rendtorff, "Is It Possible to Read Leviticus as a Separate Book?" 22–35; cf. G. Auld, "Leviticus at the Heart of the Pentateuch?" in Sawyer, ed., *Reading Leviticus*, 40–51.

dependent relationship with the preceding and following books of the Pentateuch.¹⁰

In spite of the many obstacles recounted in Genesis and Exodus, Abraham's descendants did multiply and the Lord brought their multitudes from slavery as he had promised (Ex. 12–15; cf. Gen. 15:13–16). God had promised them the land of Canaan (Gen. 15:18–21; 17:7–8), but it was at Mount Sinai that he made a nation out of this motley crew. There he gave them a national constitution (his law) and a portable capitol (the tabernacle). He taught them how to live as one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. This was not legalism or ritualism. It was survival as a people, and only as one people could they survive. Without the God of Abraham to hold them together, they would splinter, scatter, be vanquished, and vanish.

The laws given in Exodus (esp. chs. 20–23) were important, but it was the sanctuary that was to be the “nuclear power plant,” energizing the Israelites' faith and thereby transforming them into a potent, unified channel of divine revelation. While the physical structure of the sanctuary was crucial (chs. 25–31; 35–40), it was the resident Presence of God that made the place powerful, and it was through dynamic interaction with him in worship that the Israelites accessed his holy power.

This is where Leviticus comes in. Here at the heart of the Torah, the focus of this middle book of the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses) is on the way God's people are to interact with divine holiness, both in worship and in other aspects of life.¹¹ Against common misunderstanding, Leviticus is no bore; it is core!



ENCOUNTERING THE GOD OF ULTIMATE REALITIES.

While many of us lack even a single gene that can be traced back to Abraham, the saga of his descendants is part of a larger story to which every person born on Planet Earth belongs. According to the Bible, the entire human race was created by God and fell into sin, which resulted in suffering and death (Gen. 1–3). Since then, God seeks to restore harmonious intimacy with estranged, broken humanity through a cumulative stream of covenants. These covenants include the ones established with Abraham and the Israelites, and they culminate in the “new covenant” (Jer. 31:31–34), by which One of Abraham's descendants brings blessing to all people (Gal. 3:8, 16). Despite the

11. On the way Leviticus calls the community to enact holiness through ritual and ethical practice, see F. H. Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community: A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus* (ITC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

deficiency of our DNA, by belonging to Jesus the Jew we are adopted into the family of Abraham and become heirs of the promises God gave him (v. 29).

If you are adopted into a family or naturalized as a citizen, you gain a new identity by joining a group of people. Their story becomes your story. I was born in Australia and came to the United States with my family at age seven so that my father could pursue graduate study. At first we experienced some culture shock, such as the first time my mother answered a knock at the door and was confronted by children in strange costumes chorusing "trick or treat," which she heard as "trigger treat." But during our twelve years as resident aliens we gradually came to identify with America and Americans. So when it became clear that we would stay, we chose to become U.S. citizens. Now the history of America is our history and its destiny is our destiny.

Not only can we connect with the Israelites because they and their culture are part of the worldwide web of humanity to which we also belong. Through our "new covenant" naturalization as Abraham's heirs, their promises are our promises, and their salvation history becomes our salvation history. Moreover, as part of this history, their Leviticus is our Leviticus.

When we read of worship at the sanctuary, we can experience the awe of approaching God's Presence, feel the weight of life-and-death consequences for human faultiness that is written with the blood of innocent animals, and rejoice in release from guilt and fear through provision for expiation that God has mercifully provided. Having encountered the God of ultimate realities in the graphic, sensory, visual world of Leviticus, we will want to return and linger often to gaze, listen, smell, touch, and ponder.