



JOHN E. ANDERSON

# It's All About Relationship

I recently began an introductory Old Testament course by asking my seminary students if they had read the Old Testament. Hands quickly shot up. "All of it?" I asked. Only one hand confidently stayed in the air. I probed further: "Even Leviticus?" The student replied without hesitation, "Well, no, not Leviticus. But I read everything else."

This student's sentiments mirror the unfortunate plight facing Leviticus. Appearing far too early in the canon, it's like kryptonite for Christians who want to read the Bible cover to cover—quickly quelling the excitement of Genesis and Exodus. With its obscure prescriptions and proscriptions, Leviticus has come to epitomize the insignificance of the Old Testament for many Christians. After all, what relevance does Leviticus, with its antiquated laws and focus on sacrifice, have for Christians given that Jesus has fulfilled the law (Matt 5:17)?

## Timeless Questions

In the early church, Christians wrestled with these very questions. In Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council questioned whether new converts needed to uphold the entire Torah. In Romans, Paul declares that "no human being will be justified in [God's] sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20), implying that the law's sole purpose is to indict, not redeem. Even the early church father Origen (AD 185–254) saw Leviticus as unpalatable in comparison with other Scriptures:

If you read people passages from the divine books that are good and clear, they will hear them with great joy. ... But provide someone a reading from Leviticus, and at once the listener will gag and push it away as if it were some bizarre food. He came, after all, to learn how to honor God, to take in the teachings that concern justice and piety. But instead he is now hearing about the ritual of burnt sacrifices!<sup>1</sup>

Christians' affection for Leviticus faded quickly—and we still feel the effects of that disenchantment. Yet Leviticus is not about archaic ritual and odd dietary taboos, or even sexual purity and appropriate sacrifice. Instead, it's about the dynamic between God and people. Leviticus is about covenant—living in right relationship with God. Or to use the book's own words, it's about the statement: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev 19:2).





## At the Center—Literally

Leviticus is part of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The word “Torah,” often translated as “law,” actually means “teaching.” The Torah provides the formative instruction for how ancient Israel was to relate to God. Joseph Blenkinsopp has pointed out that in the Torah, Leviticus is central not only figuratively but also literally, occupying the central panel of that group of five.<sup>2</sup> This placement is not mere happenstance; the priests responsible for writing and compiling Leviticus were likely those who arranged the Pentateuch. Leviticus is meant to be read in concert with the Pentateuch as a whole, not in isolation.


## Leviticus and Covenant

That Leviticus is intimately tied to covenant becomes evident in its narrative setting. From Exodus 19 to Numbers 10, Israel is encamped at the base of Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai was the location of that formative event in Israel’s memory that constituted their identity as a people in relationship with God. Leviticus, then, is not addressed only to priests and religious specialists, but to the entire nation of Israel gathered at the base of Sinai.<sup>3</sup>

The focus on covenant is perhaps most clear in Leviticus 26, where the word “covenant” (*berit*, ברית) occurs eight times—double its occurrences elsewhere in the book. God speaks of “maintain[ing] my covenant” (26:9), relating a series of blessings and curses tied to Israel’s covenantal obedience or disobedience. Therefore, with its focus on purity, sacrifice and dietary taboos, Leviticus shouldn’t be regarded as a legalistic killjoy, but as an attempt to preserve the purity—and thus well-being—of the covenant community.

Holiness isn’t an intrinsic quality we can possess of our own accord (see Lev 19:2). We are holy on account of our relationship with God. Holiness is a quality of God that cannot be shared, only imitated. It involves separateness, and this is precisely the type of community ancient Israel was called to be: a holy people, a priestly nation, a witness to the world of the holiness of God.

## Reclaiming Leviticus for Christian Theology

Leviticus finds its greatest relevance for Christian theology in the sacrifices that needed to be continually offered to God to maintain covenant relationship. Without reference to sacrifice in Leviticus, we cannot fully comprehend the passion of Jesus. Hebrews 9 appeals to the institution of sacrifice and understands Jesus as both the high priest and the sacrificial offering that restores right relationship to God. The well-worn Christian belief that we are “saved by the blood of the lamb” has its roots in Leviticus—the book that so many have deemed unbecoming of the stuff of faith. Christ’s passion, refracted through Leviticus, sets out to achieve the same ends for us now as it did for ancient Israel: restoring the covenant relationship between a holy God and His people. 

Biblical references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>1</sup> Origen, *Homily 27: Numbers 33:1-49*, quoted in Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 45–47.

<sup>3</sup> Joel N. Lohr, “The Book of Leviticus,” in *A Theological Introduction to the Pentateuch: Interpreting the Torah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 86.



Pick up Blenkinsopp’s *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* in Eerdmans Old Testament History Collection. Go to [Logos.com/EerdmansOT](http://Logos.com/EerdmansOT)



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