

Leviticus for Lent

This article was originally designed for ministers and Bible-study leaders, but can benefit anyone wanting a better grasp of Leviticus. It was originally published in the journal of EFAC Australia (the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion): *Essentials*, Summer 2009/2010, pp.1–3, and is reproduced with permission.

Leviticus used to be the first book that Jewish children studied in the synagogue. In the modern Church it tends to be the last part of the Bible anyone looks at seriously. ... "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) is the only memorable maxim in what is to many an otherwise dull book. In practice then, though not of course in theory, Leviticus is treated as though it does not really belong to the canon of sacred Scripture.

So opens the landmark commentary by Gordon Wenham. Sadly, I think his verdict remains true more than thirty years after it was penned.

The Quest

My quest is to get books like Leviticus back on the agenda. This article is an opportunity for me to offer you a quick refresher of its contents and relevance. And the pending season of Lent is one of many good opportunities when you might do the same for believers around you, especially in ministry contexts which seek a formal, distinctive series for the season.

What follows is purely to stir up your theological enthusiasm and to set your creative juices flowing. The suggestions will work well as a sermon series, but could easily be adapted for personal devotions or group Bible studies or youth reflections. (I'm yet to trial it as a children's program!)

Apart from being *essential* background to the culture and teaching of the New Testament, Leviticus is fertile soil for nurturing believers in biblical theology. Here I've linked each week's study of Leviticus with material from Hebrews. These links suggest some useful application, model the kinds of biblical theology you might develop, and (at the very least) anchor the unfamiliar Old Testament book in the 'safety' of the New Testament. There are other directions which might better suit your particular flock. I've also listed only five weeks, leaving you free to expand or combine different topics as best suits your calendar.

Week 1: sacrifice

Leviticus 1–7 opens with the painfully detailed list of sacrifices. Indeed, the details are given twice (1:1–6:7; 6:8–7:38). It's precisely the kind of opening which immediately turns readers off!

I'd choose to work through one or two of the sacrifices. The sin offerings of ch.4 are particularly pertinent, because they address (in turn) the sins of congregational leaders, corporate groups, 'secular' rulers, and personal transgressors. I've found it very powerful to observe that God is alienated by—and sacrifice is required for—*unintentional* sins (4:27–31).

The New Testament relevance of this can be expounded many ways. There's the simple observation that every Jew in the NT is caught up with this sacrificial system. Jesus himself, along with many of the NT authors, recognises that his death is the epitome of these sacrifices. Virtually every denomination celebrates that 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.' The line comes from Hebrews 9:22 (a passage used later), which itself is grounded in these Levitical sacrifices (e.g. Lev. 17:11).

If you want to consistently draw links with Hebrews, then Hebrews 10:1–18 is a great 'destination', especially 10:1–4 and/or 10:11–14. You might draaag out the long litany of sacrifices in Leviticus...in stark contrast with the single, once-for-all-time atonement achieved by Jesus!

Week 2: priesthood

Leviticus 8–10 works through issues of the priesthood. God cares for elaborate, costumed ordinations! These Old Testament priests are consecrated in order to facilitate the sacrifices, ensuring people's safety in God's presence (9:22–24); and to teach the people what God expects (10:10–11).

The New Testament parallel is not with any human order of priests. (All believers are called to a priest-

hood; e.g. 1 Peter 2:4–10; Rev. 1:5–6; 5:9–10. But this draws not on Israel’s priests but on her covenant role founded in Exodus 19:5–6.)

Rather, the position of Jesus as the greatest of all priests is the central message of Hebrews. Nearly every chapter of that book has relevance, but we might single out a few. Hebrews 7 offers the argument from biblical theology that Jesus’ priesthood surpasses that of all others. A more pastoral mileage can be made from passages like 2:10–18 and 4:14–5:10. Each of these calls contemporary Christian believers to endure in their faith and to persist through times of dryness and persecution. This is precisely because Jesus was not only the perfect sacrifice, but is the ideal priest who fully identifies with human frailty.

Week 3: clean and unclean

People may have met Leviticus 11–15 in passing. They may well have found them confusing. Why are some foods in and others out? Why do baby girls make a mother unclean for twice as long as their brothers do? What must we do today—if anything—about pimples, mildew at home, and various bodily discharges?!

Many answers have traditionally been offered. Indeed, it’s passages like these which lead many Christians to disregard Leviticus altogether. But, since Wenham’s commentary, there has been a recognition that the same concerns of the whole book pervade these chapters: what is it that permits or prevents a member of the people of God to stand safely in the presence of this holy deity? (Wenham’s ideas are neatly summarised and easily accessible in his article on ‘Clean and Unclean’ in the *New Bible Dictionary*, or Chris Wright’s on ‘Leviticus’ in the *New Bible Commentary*.)

We need to draw attention to the fact that a number of these laws have been explicitly abrogated in the New Testament. Jesus explained that the Old Testament system was a set of training wheels, by which God’s people might come to realise that un/cleanness is an internal not external matter (Mark 7:1–23, esp. 7:19). Similarly, much of Paul’s ministry in Acts and his letters is concerned to show that believers are clean independent of such external rules (e.g. Romans 14).

The issue of cleanness is raised at various points in Hebrews, perhaps no more clearly than in the famous

10:19–25. The superior sacrifice by the ultimate priest ensures perfect, safe access for believers into the very presence of our sinless God!

(And isn’t God kind?! Those few texts from Hebrews which are most familiar and accessible to modern believers are those which [1] stand as key thematic or application passages in that book, and which [2] connect most helpfully in showing the message of God’s prior revelation in Leviticus and other parts of the Old Testament.)

Week 4: the Day of Atonement

People may have heard of Jewish *Yom Kippur*, and the detailed message of Leviticus 16 shows just how pertinent the celebration is for Christians. The message is so central and significant that it warrants a week to itself. You may even ensure Leviticus 16 coincides with your key Easter teaching (see below).

Despite the exhausting specificity of the preceding fifteen chapters, the whole God-given system of purification remains imperfect. It needs to be purified and ‘reset’ every year.

One teacher uses the helpful illustration of medical surgery. The surgeon endures any number of washings and layers of protective clothing, to avoid the slightest chance of infection. Despite the care taken to prepare the surgeon and the patient, the whole ‘theatre’ of activity also needs to be regularly sterilised: the room and its utensils have to be purified and reset on a regular basis.

This is precisely what the rigorous Day of Atonement rituals achieved. The chief ‘surgeon’ (priest) and various assistants worked hard to ensure that the year’s accumulated ‘infections’ were removed and that the theatre of activity was ready, safe for the operations of another year. The rigour also allowed the chief priest—through extremely careful purification, and only once each year—to enter into the very presence of God (esp. 16:1–3, 15–19). [Of course, the analogy can only be pushed so far. The priests cleanse the temple system, not because they fear ‘infection’, but so that the Chief Surgeon can safely live and move among His people.]

How stunning that Jesus’ sacrifice has rendered such Days of Atonement redundant—and indeed the whole

OT system of sacrifice, temple and priesthood! Hebrews 9 (esp. 9:6–14) draws the parallels overtly for us. Christian believers are no longer dependent on imperfect, temporary sacrifices (9:8–10). We have witnessed *the* Day of Atonement. Jesus has purified not the earthly tent/tabernacle, where one priest could shield his eyes as he approached God once each year, but the heavenly reality where *all* believers can dare march boldly and regularly into God’s presence (9:11–14)! What a stunning claim, which adds so much colour to the central commands in Hebrews that believers should maximise their free and fearless access to the majestic ruler of heaven and earth (4:14–16; 10:19–25)!!

How great is our God, sing with me...

Week 5: holy living

Time would fail me to tell of the ways we might approach Leviticus 17–27. This section is known as the ‘holiness code’, and outlines some of the rules of conduct we expect to find in Old Testament books. Whether you choose to dispense with this material in a single week, or explore it over two or three, there are various matters you could highlight:

This is, at the very least, an opportunity to demonstrate how to engage with OT laws. Are contemporary Christians obliged to obey these? Only some? Why or why not?

It’s amazing how pertinent some of this holiness code remains today. Whether or not we agree, these chapters are sometimes used to favour kosher/halal meat or to avoid meat altogether (ch.17); they ground our cultural boundaries about incestuous relationships (ch. 18); they offer guidance (and law?) about good governance and tithes (chs.19–22, 27). There is informative teaching about liturgical calendars (chs.23–24); foundational instructions concerning (economic?) Jubilee (ch.25); and a threatening chapter about how behaviour brings reward or punishment from God (ch.26). Each of these OT topics—and its continuation or transformation or abrogation in the NT—will not only offer rich discussion of Christian living, but also great opportunities to discuss and display biblical theology in operation.

The biggest topic, of course, is how salvation and holiness are linked. There is a sense in which every Chris-

tian is addressed in the NT as one of ‘the saints’, one of ‘the holy ones’. And yet the NT also reiterates the call for ongoing sanctification (being made holy) for commensurate holy living. The cry of Leviticus is particularly prominent in passages like 1 Peter 1:13–21. Instructions for right behaviour conclude most of the epistles, including Hebrews 13. And the final goal of a spotless, holy bride for Christ is an excellent vision statement to set before his church (e.g. Eph. 5:25–33; Rev. 21:1–8).

Mix and Match

The ideas I’ve given here can readily be adapted to make the best impact in your context. Some might delay the study of Leviticus 16 so that it falls near/at Easter; it neatly summarises the whole book. Others might delay the series or expand the opening weeks so that Leviticus 16 stays in canonical order yet still falls at Easter—leaving one or two studies to follow, exploring what kind of holiness God expects *in light of the Easter sacrifice*.

These ideas might prompt you to preach or study Leviticus in more depth, or might facilitate a more detailed series on Hebrews. Good biblical theology provides a smooth entrée into both Old and New Testaments.

So pray. Be creative. Perhaps even share your results so that others might discover fresh ways to reveal such fabulous parts of Christian Scripture.

Further Reading

One small group at another church has adapted this approach: <pocketmojo.net/index.php/godstuff/2009/06/18/studying_leviticus>

Good commentaries exist. Those which particularly supplement exegesis with thoughtful application include, in increasing weightiness: Chris Wright (*New Bible Commentary*, 1994); Gordon Wenham (NICOT, 1979); Roy Gane (NIVAC, 2004); John Hartley (WBC, 1992). Even more overtly theological, supplemented with some exegesis, are Derek Tidball (BST, 2005); Allen Ross (*Holiness to the Lord*, 2002).

Andrew Malone

Andrew is a member of GWAC, and teaches biblical studies at Ridley Melbourne, with a particular interest in rehabilitating neglected parts of Scripture. Stand by for ‘Chronicles for Christmas’!?