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 J. R. Porter
 Excerpt
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LEVITICUS

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THE CHARACTER OF THE BOOK

The word 'Leviticus' comes from the title of the work, *Liber Leviticus*, in the Vulgate, the Latin version of the Old Testament made by Jerome about A.D. 400, which in turn is a translation of the name given to it in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the late B.C. period. So the name is descriptive, 'the Levitical book', that is, concerned with the temple personnel, all of whom were supposed to be descended from Levi, the third son of the patriarch Jacob. In one way, the description gives a good idea of the work's character. It was produced in the circles of the priesthood that survived and regrouped themselves after the fall of the kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians in 587 B.C. It is also in part a manual to instruct the priests in the correct performance of their liturgical duties, especially about their part in carrying out the increasingly elaborate ritual of sacrifice, but in other areas of the cultus, that is, the whole sphere of official public worship, too. From another point of view, the description is inadequate. Priests in Israel always had a responsibility for ascertaining the divine will for individuals and the nation in general, for teaching and explaining God's commandments to the people from generation to generation and for seeing that they were observed in the actual administration of justice and the conduct of ordinary life. These duties became increasingly important with the disappearance of the monarchical state-system at the exile and from that time, the priesthood, and especially the high priest, gradually emerged as the leaders of the nation. So Leviticus also contains a great deal of instruction addressed directly to the laity, to teach them both their religious and civil obligations and to bring

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home to them how important it was that these be observed.

At a first reading, the book of Leviticus may seem a confused and disorderly collection of unrelated materials. We have to remember that ancient literature often does not follow the methods of logical arrangement which seem so natural to us and also that, as will be seen, the work can only be properly understood as part of a much larger whole. In fact, a fairly clear shape can be discerned in it. Its kernel is chs. 8–10, which are in narrative form, and which continue, originally from the end of the book of Exodus, a great priestly narrative in which all the collections of laws are now set. But because these chapters recount the beginning of Israelite sacrificial worship, the section chs. 1–7 was prefixed to them, giving the necessary details of how sacrifices were to be performed. The distinctive mark of the worshipping community thus constituted was its ‘holiness’, that is, its being set apart from all other peoples to belong solely to God: so there follow chs. 11–16 which give directions for maintaining and preserving holiness. Finally, what is involved in the summons to be the holy nation is spelled out for ordinary life in the remaining chapters of the book.

THE PRIESTLY WORK

Leviticus was not originally a separate and self-contained unity but formed part of a continuous whole comprising what are now the first five (or, more probably the first four) books of the Old Testament. This great work is primarily a collection of a vast amount of material with very different dates and backgrounds but it has been given a definite shape and arrangement by the priestly circles mentioned above. Many scholars think that the priestly school first produced its own document, covering much the same ground as the other sources which can be discovered in Genesis–Numbers, which is usually known by the letter ‘P’. The priestly writers later

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joined this to the other sources and made it a framework into which they were all fitted. Other scholars believe that 'P' never existed as a separate document but that the parts of the Old Testament which are assigned to it represent rather the editorial activity of the priestly school as it collected and arranged the older materials and stamped them with its distinctive outlook. From the point of view of our understanding of the books in question, it perhaps does not matter a great deal which view is adopted. It would be generally agreed, first, that at least Genesis–Numbers as they now exist are the product of the priestly writers, who meant them to be understood from their own point of view and, secondly, that what is contained in Leviticus in particular is much more distinctively priestly in character than most of the other sources in those books.

The final result of the activity of the priestly writers was a lengthy narrative, relating the history, first of mankind as a whole and then of Israel, from the creation of the world in Gen. 1 to the death of Moses, the priestly account of which is to be found in Deut. 32: 48–52 and 34: 1, 7–9, although it once probably stood at the end of what is now the book of Numbers. But it is history in a special sense, for what interested the priestly editors were the statutes and commandments which God had given in the past. So, in their particular work, the collections of laws are by far the most prominent feature and the narrative only an accompaniment to them, to explain when and how they were given. Above all, their special interest, to which all the previous history leads up, was in the constitution of Israel as a national and religious community at Mount Sinai on the basis of the divine laws and regulations received there. So the core of the distinctively priestly material is formed by the enactments of Exod. 25–31; 35–40, by Leviticus, and by similar laws comprising a large part of Numbers. According to the priestly concept, as we see very clearly in Leviticus, Moses is not so much the great national leader and founding-father, but rather the recipient

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of the divine law which he then has to transmit exactly to the Israelites.

This does not mean, however, that by any means all the legal collections were actually formulated by the priestly writers responsible for the narrative framework. Sometimes this is the case and sometimes, too, they have worked over and expanded older material with their own legal teaching. Often, however, they simply incorporated virtually unchanged into their narrative of the giving of the law at Sinai a number of collections of laws, stemming from different historical periods and different areas of Palestine. This is very markedly true of Leviticus, which contains at least two such older, independent collections, chs. 1-7 and 17-26. Even when the priestly editorial activity is more obvious, as in the collection in chs. 11-16, yet even then it is often largely a case of systematizing and interpreting very ancient regulations. Indeed, strictly speaking, there is comparatively little of the immediate and direct work of the priestly school in Leviticus, although the book can only be properly understood in its setting as part of the priestly source as a whole.

WHEN AND WHERE WAS THE PRIESTLY WORK
WRITTEN?

In trying to discover the date when the priestly work assumed its final form, we may begin from the fact that neither the historical and prophetic books written before the exile nor the other sources in the first five books of the Old Testament show any trace of the distinctive language and religious outlook which so clearly stamps the priestly source. Since that language and outlook had so great an influence on subsequent literature – for example, on the books of Chronicles – and indeed on the whole character of later Judaism, it is difficult to believe that the priestly work would not have affected those other writings had it been in existence when they took shape. On the other hand, the priestly work has close affinities,

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in its aim and theology, with Deuteronomy and Ezekiel, both of which come essentially from the period of the exile. Further, as will be seen below, the most probable reason why the priestly writers ever embarked on their great task was to meet the challenge posed by the trauma of the exile and to provide a structure for the community which was slowly rebuilding itself in Palestine in the years following the catastrophe.

We may suggest, then, that the priestly work was later than Deuteronomy and Ezekiel, at a time when a restored community in the Promised Land was a practical possibility, perhaps even as early as the late sixth century B.C. This is supported by the fact that often the priestly source seems to presuppose ritual practices which only become normative with the building of the second temple and also by its special picture of the figure of Aaron, which is quite different from how he appears in the other sources of Genesis–Numbers. In the priestly source, Aaron is both the high priest and the ancestor of the whole priesthood: both these features reflect developments which only occurred after the return from exile (cp. p. 60). Whether the actual work of the priestly school was carried out in Babylonia or in Palestine is not easy to decide. Certainly, the priests of Jerusalem who had been taken into exile were among the contributors, for specifically Jerusalem cultic traditions, which they would have preserved, play an important part in it. But the priestly work also incorporates a much wider range of cultic traditions and, if the position adopted in the succeeding commentary can be accepted, it took them over as collections which were only formed on the soil of Palestine after 587 B.C. Perhaps, then, it is most likely that the priestly work was a result of the united priesthood, formed between the old Jerusalem priests when they returned from Babylonia and the priests from other Israelite shrines who had replaced them during the exile, and that its background is Jerusalem from the period of Haggai and Zechariah onwards (cp. p. 16).

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But the question of the date of the priestly work is a subtle one: it is really only possible to speak of the date of the material which the priestly writers themselves produced or of the final great whole for which this provided the arrangement and the interpretation. When we go on to consider the origin of the material which they incorporated into their narrative and which, as has been seen, forms so large a part of the total product, the problem becomes much more complicated. On the one hand, the priestly editors took over previously existing legal collections, which probably represent the traditions of various Israelite sanctuaries during the monarchical period. But, on the other hand, these collections themselves are made up of still smaller collections and even separate individual laws, which were generally passed on by word of mouth. Many of them go back to the days before there was such an entity as 'Israel'. They may even be originally Canaanite. Since they remained in force from age to age, it is impossible to date them: they are timeless. Hence the process by which a book like Leviticus reached its present form is a long and complicated one. The work contains legal material from many centuries which, because laws deal with real-life situations, throws much light on the nature of Israelite society at different stages in its development.

The difficulties in translating Leviticus are not caused by textual problems – since the text was written and transmitted in a single scholarly circle, it is generally in a good state – but from the occurrence of so many ancient, rare, and often unique, words and expressions of whose true meaning and significance scholars are still quite unsure.

THE PURPOSE OF LEVITICUS

The structure of Leviticus is thus highly complex but, fortunately, the reason why it was composed as part of the priestly work is not hard to see. Although the laws it contains are placed within a historical narrative and represented as being

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given in the distant past, yet the priestly work is in fact not directed to the past but to the present and future. It was undertaken as a direct response to the destruction of the northern and southern kingdoms which, as the ancient Near East saw things, could be expected to mean the end alike of Israel's God and his people (cp. 2 Kings 18: 33–5). Other writings in the Old Testament were produced to meet the same situation, notably the so-called 'Deuteronomic History', running from Joshua to the end of 2 Kings, and the book of Ezekiel. Another example of such a response to the catastrophe of the exile, earlier than the priestly source, but, like it, the work of priests and having a very similar outlook on events, is 'the law of holiness' which now forms chs. 17–26 of Leviticus itself.

The priestly school sought to cope with the shock of national disaster in various ways. First, it was concerned to preserve the fundamental laws, which were the basis of the people's life, by fixing them in writing (cp. e.g. p. 25). Many of these were ancient customs, handed on orally, as we have seen, and because of the disruption caused by foreign invasions, were in danger of being lost and forgotten. In this, the priests were only extending their traditional function as guardians and transmitters of law. But they now went further. In their work, all law was represented as the direct commandment of God himself, given for all time at the very beginning of Israel's existence as a nation (cp. the comment on 27: 34). The law-giving at Mount Sinai was the time of perfect communion between God and people, just as the wilderness period was in the message of the prophets.

Secondly, the priestly writers tried to understand and explain to their people the reasons for the tragedy which had happened to them. Here, like the writers of Deuteronomy, they adopted and developed the teaching of the great prophets before the exile, which had largely gone unheeded, and we must never forget that it was Judaism after the exile, the creation of the priesthood, which preserved and put into

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writing the prophetic oracles. It was not that God was powerless to defend his people, as the whole of the world surrounding Israel would have believed. Rather, disaster was actually sent by him, with foreign conquerors as no more than his agents, as a just punishment for Israel's constant disobedience to the terms of the covenant they had once accepted. The distinctive way in which the priestly school presented this message was by setting out in detail the laws and commandments which gave practical expression to the covenant obligations, to bring home how often and in how many ways the Israelites had failed to observe them.

But if the law represented a judgement on the past, to the priestly school it was also a warning and a promise for the future. For, thirdly, another aim of the priestly work was to show that God's commandments remained in force and that they could become the foundation for a reconstructed community, if only they were observed faithfully as they had not been before. So reiterated teaching and exhortation, to emphasize the importance of keeping the law if Israel was to revive and survive, is a marked feature of the priestly source. In Leviticus, this is especially true of 'the law of holiness', which can be seen as an extended sermon on this theme. But the priests also endeavoured to make the keeping of the law a practical possibility for the people of their own time. Partly this was done by reinterpreting ancient regulations whose original significance was no longer understood, and by extending and developing them, through decisions in actual cases of difficulty, to meet changing social and economic circumstances (cp. pp. 196–7 below). More importantly, it was done through a new emphasis on elements which had been present in embryo in the faith of Israel before but had not previously been sufficiently appreciated. So, in Leviticus, we find a heightened awareness of sin and guilt as things that destroy the bond between God and his subjects, accompanied by a new interpretation of the sacrificial system, and the one sanctuary where it is carried out, as the means by which sin

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can be taken away and as the focus of divine forgiveness (cp. p. 11 below). In these ways, we see the beginnings of scholarly and scribal commentary on the law which was to develop into the massive intellectual achievement of rabbinic Judaism.

THE THEOLOGICAL VALUE OF THE BOOK

At the outset, it must be stressed that Leviticus, and the priestly work generally, take for granted the basic covenant faith of Israel. This needs saying because there are still some who try to draw a sharp distinction between the 'priestly' and the 'prophetic' outlooks in the Old Testament, almost as though they were two different religions. But we have already seen several examples of the essential similarity in the way both priests and prophets understood the nation's relationship with God and interpreted the course of its history. The priesthood after the exile was the heir to the message of the great prophets and one reason why the particular writings which make up the Old Testament were selected from a much larger body of ancient Hebrew literature was that they all express a common faith in God's choice of Israel and the consequences which flow from this fact. The covenant with Israel and the canon of books in the Old Testament are inseparable.

Nevertheless, there are some distinctive features and particular emphases of priestly theology, especially as found in Leviticus, which often cause difficulty for a modern reader. One is the insistence on the keeping of the commandments of the law as ensuring a right relationship with God. Much religious thinking today would feel this to be an artificial, even a legalistic, understanding of that relationship; for Christian thinking, it seems at variance with Paul's teaching in the New Testament. But here two points need to be borne in mind. First, there is the religious outlook of the wider world in which Israel lived. There, gods were usually arbitrary

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and capricious: they were bound by no rules and a man could never be sure what attitude they would take to his actions. It was therefore a great advance when Abraham could ask God, expecting a positive answer, 'Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?' (Gen. 18: 25), that is, act in accordance with a standard which he himself has set and which man can know. Secondly, all the individual regulations were viewed as stemming from the covenant made by God with Israel; they were a gift of God, part of his great work of grace by which he had freed the Israelites from Egypt and settled them in the Promised Land. So the divine mercy is expressed by a word which means 'keeping faith' (cp. Exod. 20: 6): as God was faithful to his side of the covenant, his people were expected to be faithful to theirs.

Again, the priestly outlook can be condemned as inward looking. It saw the law as Israel's possession which separated it sharply from all other nations who had no share in the covenant. It is easy to see the dangers in this attitude and its exclusiveness did not go unchallenged after the exile, as we can see from the Old Testament itself in such a protest as the book of Jonah. Once again, however, we have to try and see the priestly achievement against the background of its own time. The priestly teachers succeeded in preserving Israel as a religious community, even when it had lost its national independence. In so doing, they also preserved the revelation of the one true God, as the basis of the new community's life, to be shared eventually by other peoples, through the witness of later Judaism, which attracted many thoughtful men of the Graeco-Roman world, and through the mission of the Christian church.

A further problem is raised by the priestly emphasis on ritual and the centrality of the sacrificial system, which is more obvious in Leviticus than in any other book of the Old Testament. The offering of sacrifice was a universal characteristic of all the religions of the ancient world and the priestly circle inherited an age-old system which they took