CHAPTER 1

The Sacred World

THE SETTING OF LEVITICUS WITHIN THE PENTATEUCH

Leviticus is likely one of the least understood and least studied books of the Bible. The foreignness of ritual sacrifice, purity laws, or ancient agrarian life presents such a chasm for the modern reader that there is often little incentive to discern its theological meaning and its relation to the rest of Scripture. This is no modern phenomena. Similar sentiments were expressed by the early church scholar Origen, who argued that a literal reading of the text by "wicked presbyters" would result in a misinterpretation of its figurative meaning for the Christian reader.[1] Even Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish rabbi, remained highly critical of the sacrificial system and sympathized with prophetic condemnation of cultic abuses. He argued that sacrifice was only given to Moses as a guide against ancient pagan religious practices but that it was never God's intent for Israel to participate in sacrificial worship forever.[2] Interpreters over the centuries have

[1] Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus 1–16*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley, The Fathers of the Church series (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 30.

[2] Isadore Twersky ed., *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 332–34.

struggled to find value or coherence in the priestly writings of Leviticus, which makes it one of the most challenging books in the biblical corpus.

One immediate difficulty that presents itself when considering the theology of Leviticus is discerning how the work sits in relation to the rest of the Pentateuch and whether or not we may describe it as a "book" in its own right. Part of the problem comes from the LXX translation of the title as *Levitikon* ("Levitical") and the Latin *Liber Leviticus*, which both point to the priestly tribe of Levi but obscure the distinction between priests and Levites that is a critical part of the book. The rabbinic Hebrew name *tôrat kôhănîm* ("teaching of priests") is just as limited in its focus. The Hebrew Bible identifies the scroll (as it does for each Pentateuchal book) by its first word *wayyiqrāʾ* ("And he called") in reference to God calling to Moses from the *ʾōhel môʿēd* ("tent of meeting"), the newly constructed tabernacle. This setting is critical because Leviticus sits in the middle of the larger Exodus/Sinai narrative and at the center of the Pentateuch.

Though the earliest extant texts of Leviticus attest to its independence as a scroll, its literary character reflects careful integration into the series of salvific events in the exodus that conclude at Mt. Sinai with the design and construction of the tabernacle. On the seventh day, Yhwh called Moses (*wayyiqrāʾ*) to ascend further up Sinai into the cloud of glory to receive the tablets of the commandments (Exod 24:16).[3] The same phrase (*wayyiqrāʾ*) introduces Leviticus when God reveals the laws concerning offerings within the tabernacle (Leviticus 1–7). This time Moses is

[3] The seven introductions can be found in Exod 25:1; 30:11, 17, 22, 34; 31:1, 12.

called to the tent, which had previously been impossible to enter because God's glory had descended upon it (Exod 40:34–35). The continuation of the theophany at Sinai centers around the newly constructed tabernacle where Yhwh now dwells. Yet God's calling to Moses from the tent in Lev 1:1 introduces a transition in the story of Israel's salvation from Egypt. With the divine decent made manifest at the end of Exodus, the theological imperative of Leviticus is to articulate how Israel might maintain their holiness in relation to the holy God who dwells in their midst. From this new reality emerges a theology of holiness that hinges on the critical relationship between Yhwh's home (the tabernacle) and every Israelite home. The two spaces are inextricably linked in Leviticus because Yhwh's requirement of holiness is one that extends to every aspect of Israelite life.

The construction of the tabernacle at the conclusion of Exodus points to a new creation, a new Eden, and the beginning of a new people, Israel, who will live and worship in God's presence. As God ordered the universe in the beginning of Genesis and created his cosmic temple, so too does Moses take on God-like qualities as he brings to completion God's tabernacle on earth. When God calls to Moses the seventh time (Exod 31:12), the reader is reminded of the seventh day of creation and God's sabbath command that will sanctify Israel and will be the sign of a perpetual covenant. Finally, on the first day of the first month in the second year of wandering in the wilderness, the tabernacle is completed (Exod 40:16–33). The fullness of Yhwh's glory descends (Exod 40:34) but there is no mention of offerings or sacrifice. Nothing is said about the consecration of the altar or how Aaron and his sons will serve within. This is where Leviticus begins and where Yhwh's first words are uttered as a continuation of the instructions already received at Sinai. Now, however, God's

initial commands in Leviticus 1–7 focus on the life of the cult and sacrifice.[4]

After the high drama at the end of Exodus, Leviticus may seem somewhat anticlimactic as we read God's next command, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, when any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock" (Lev 1:1). What may seem to be a boring turn of events in the narrative is, in fact, critical to maintaining the order and holiness of God's abode. Without ongoing sacrifices, rituals, and purifications, the tabernacle cannot function as a place where the divine intersects with the world and brings blessing to the people. The abiding presence of God with Israel is, to borrow Brueggemann's phrase, one of its core testimonies that expresses a belief in the visible, tangible experience of God's glory.[5] This is, in part, why Leviticus stands on its own as an individual book of the Pentateuch – it reveals an entire system of worship that encompasses cultic, ethical, and family matters that teach the Israelites how to live in relationship to God and to their neighbor.[6]

If the inauguration of the tabernacle is the decisive narrative and theological link between Exodus and Leviticus, we can begin to

[4] For a more in-depth treatment of the timings around the ordination of Aaron and his sons, the consecration of the altar, and God's glory descending in Exodus, see Gary A. Anderson, *That I May Dwell Among Them: Incarnation and Atonement in the Tabernacle Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023), 19–48.

[5] See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

[6] Cf. Martin Noth, *Leviticus: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 9–17. Interestingly, Leviticus makes no mention of hymnic praise, which was a typical Levitical activity in the Second Temple period (1 Chr 23:30).

understand why there is so much emphasis on sacrifice and purity. We may, however, question why so much detail is necessary since different types of sacrifices and offerings had already been a part of Israelite worship since the time of the patriarchs. Burnt offerings were made by Noah after the flood (Gen 8:20) and by Abraham in the place of his son Isaac (Gen 22:13). Sacrifices to God were known by Moses as he had argued with Pharaoh about not being able to make offerings in Egypt lest they caused an outrage among the Egyptians who would consider it an abomination (Exod 8:25–26; cf. 10:25). The altar laws of Exod 20:24–26 also give instruction for general sacrifices whether on earth mounds or stone. At the base of Mt. Sinai, to ratify the covenant, Moses instructs the young men to help offer two types of sacrifice – the *ʿōlâ* ("whole burnt offering") and the *šəlāmîm* ("peace offering" or "well-being offering") (Exod 24:5; cf. 32:6), which are later explained in detail in Leviticus. Following a chronological narrative from Genesis to Exodus, we might question why Leviticus offers further commandments regarding sacrifices.

The rhetorical force of Leviticus is that, with the consecration of God's holy abode on earth, there is now a need for "specialists" (i.e., priests) within the community to be set apart to make offerings according to God's specific prescriptions.[7] Only men of certain lineage may be consecrated as priests to draw near to God's holiness. This is emphasized by the continual refrain in the opening chapters of Leviticus where cultic functions, like the sprinkling of blood, are to be performed only by "Aaron and his sons" (Lev 3:2, 8, 13; 6:16; 10:12; 13:2). Israel's relation to the

[7] James W. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 104–7; James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 73.

tabernacle, and the divine presence within, requires distinct cultic instructions that must be performed by authorized persons alone. These new regulations reform the previous altar laws of the covenant code since they describe the particularity of sacrifice *within the tabernacle space* with a rhetorical emphasis on the priestly role. The average Israelite was still involved in the sacrifice, but the priest's role becomes prominent in Leviticus as one who orders and oversees cultic life in and around the tabernacle. The result is an elevated theology of priesthood that maintains a high regard for lay participation and knowledge of the cult.

Leviticus, it will be argued, does not restrict the priesthood to a single, central shrine but implicitly allows for sacrifices to take place at multiple sites. What remains critical for the theology of Leviticus is not *where* sacrifices take place but that they take place at an *authorized altar* by an *authorized priest* according to God's prescriptions.[8] Leviticus is not concerned with a centralized shrine but, rather, it emphasizes the sanctity and holiness of the priesthood that serves the community within the presence of God's holy altar.

Leviticus is not, however, simply a manual for priests that is shrouded in mystery like some gnostic, esoteric text reserved for the elite who lived behind temple walls. Its instructions are made known to the people of Israel who, in turn, can hold the priests accountable for their actions. Though strict divisions made between layperson and priest seem to promote a social hierarchy, these divisions serve, instead, to demystify the cult and level out social relationships so that the prevailing call to holiness is incumbent on all of God's people (cf. Lev 19:2). As Brueggemann argues,

[8] This is one of the chief criticisms of Jeroboam in 1 Kgs 12:31–32 when he appoints priests for the sanctuaries at Bethel and Dan who are not Levites.

"This may suggest that the extended inventory of sacrifices and related materials in the book of Leviticus is to be understood not as a manual for practice, but as a liturgical, aesthetic act of imagination of what the world of Israel is like when it is known to be focused upon glad responses in obedience and sacrifice to YHWH."[9] Leviticus, therefore, seeks to order the cult as it consolidates, secures, and standardizes sacred traditions around ritual and sacrifice, but it does so by presenting (and sometimes explaining) how it functions so that religious power is not held by a select few.

The narrative connection between Exodus and Leviticus is critical in understanding the shift in focus from God's power revealed in the deliverance from Egypt to the power of his holiness revealed at Sinai, which is then made manifest in the tabernacle. Yhwh's home on earth is a sign of salvation, new creation, and the promise of his abiding presence with his people. His glory fills the tent at the end of Exodus, but its function is not complete until the altar is consecrated and atonement becomes possible through the priests. Though the narrative links to Exodus are clear, the book of Leviticus stands on its own as a priestly and prophetic book. Sacrifice, atonement, and how Israel can live as a holy people are at the heart of its *kerygma*, which offers a holistic theology through both ritual and ethical practice.

The emergence of such a "book" in Israel stems from ancient cultic traditions and liturgical rites that were collated, refined, edited, and passed on from generation to generation. Layers of tradition will be discernible in the text that may reflect different

[9] Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 98.

time periods or the theological interests and concerns of the authors, but the goal of the present study is to determine how these different theological strands come together to form the theology of the Book of Leviticus in its final form. Leviticus puts forward its own vision for Israel's calling as a priestly kingdom that reflects an overarching concern for the holiness of God and how that is reflected in the holiness of God's people.

A THEOLOGY OF HOLINESS

At the heart of the theology of the Book of Leviticus is holiness. Holiness resonates throughout each chapter and culminates in the all-encompassing command, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev 19:2). Holiness is to permeate every aspect of Israelite life whether it is offering a sacrifice, eating a meal, tending to the land or animals, having sex, or loving one's neighbor. The priestly world is defined by the sacred and the glory of God's permanent presence abiding with his people. William Blake once wrote, "everything that lives is holy,"[10] which expresses well the sentiment of Leviticus. Every aspect of life is holy because all things live in relation to the holy God of Israel who now dwells on earth. The emphasis on holiness is not, as P. R. Davies suggests, a type of "neurosis" to which all life is reduced as if it is merely the result of social, political, or economic forces.[11] Instead, holiness offers a vision for a world in which the

[10] William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 160.

[11] Philip R. Davies, "Leviticus as a Cultic System in the Second Temple Period: Remarks on the Paper by Hannah K. Harrington," in *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer, JSOTSS 227 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 230–37 (236–37).

divine presence is fully manifest in the tabernacle that sanctifies Israel and the land.

The biblical idea of holiness is difficult to grasp because it relates to the numinous, wholly otherness of God.[12] Only God is holy and people or objects become holy by being set apart to him. The Hebrew root *q-d-š* generally means to set apart for holy purposes. When used in the *pîēl* verbal stem, it means "sanctify, make holy," which refers to something that is transferred from the profane into God's presence. This can relate to time (sabbath, festivals), to people (priests), or to offerings on the altar. For something to be set apart as holy means that it has been dedicated to God and thereby acquires a degree of God's holiness.

To become holy something must first be taken from the ordinary or profane. In English, the word "profane" often takes on negative moral connotations today, but it derives from the Latin *pro* ("before, outside") *fanum* ("temple"). The term originally referred to anything that dealt with matters of life and work outside the temple.[13] In biblical Hebrew, the verbal root for "profane" (*ḥ-l-l*) describes something that is no longer suitable to come into God's presence or that has been defiled. This more negative nuance, however, should not be confused with a permanent state of contamination. Instead, Leviticus understands that the consecration of life is an ongoing process. People and things can move toward Yhwh's holiness or they can become defiled and move away from his holiness. For most things, the state of uncleanness in the profane world is temporary and can be

[12] See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of Holiness*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 5–11.

[13] Cf. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (repr. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), 37.

remedied. As Baruch Levine argues, "The gulf between the sacred and the profane was not meant to be permanent. The command to achieve holiness, to become holy, envisions a time when life would be consecrated in its fullness and when all nations would worship God in holiness."[14] Though Leviticus is concerned with separation and division between the sacred and the profane, the end goal is for God's holiness to flow from his dwelling place to his people and to the world.

The theology of holiness in Leviticus is multilayered and is concerned with both ethical obedience to God's commands as well as cultic obedience expressed through ritual. Holiness in Leviticus is not presented as a set of propositional truths about God, but it is conveyed through signs, symbols, rituals, and actions that convey the drama of participating in God's salvation. To understand this drama, one must look to the culture and worldview that undergirds each ritual act in order to determine its meaning.[15] Clifford Geertz argues that "any religious ritual, no matter how apparently automatic or conventional . . . involves this symbolic fusion of ethos and world view."[16] The dialectic nature between thought and action is critical in the study of Leviticus because its theology is expressed through word, symbol, and ritual performance. This can be a challenge for modern readers due to the fact that the rituals of Leviticus stem from an ancient agrarian culture where life consisted largely of subsistence farming and religious beliefs that centered around blood sacrifice.

[14] Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 257.
[15] Frank H. Gorman Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology*, JSOTSS 91 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 15.
[16] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 113; cf. 126–41.