

Leviticus



William Holman Hunt. *The Scapegoat* (oil on canvas), 1854.
Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, Merseyside, England.

with

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Leviticus

Traditional Author:	Moses
Traditional Date Written:	c. 1446-1406 B.C.
Period Covered:	1445 B.C.

Introduction

Leviticus is probably the most neglected book in the Bible. Most people think of it—if they think of it at all—as an antiquated collection of laws and rituals for worship that have little relevance today: few people have actually read it; fewer still have studied it.

The Hebrew name for Leviticus is *vyeeek'rah*, the first word of the Hebrew text, and it means “*And he called.*” In the literary structure of the Bible, Leviticus continues the book of Exodus, suggesting that we study Exodus and Leviticus as one narrative unit. Recall that when we left Exodus, God had come down from Mt. Sinai to manifest himself in the Tabernacle built by his people, according to his detailed instructions:

Thus Moses finished all the work. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled down upon it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

(Exodus 40: 33-35)

In Exodus, we hear God speak to his people from the top of Mt. Sinai in a voice of thunder; in Leviticus, he speaks intimately from within the Tabernacle. In Exodus, God offers the Israelites a unique role in the plan of salvation; in Leviticus, they learn what that role entails.

Holiness is the theme of Leviticus. The Hebrew word for “holy” is *kawdoshe*, and it appears more often in Leviticus than in any other book of the Bible. (In Genesis, “holy” occurs only one time; in Exodus, 31 times; in Leviticus, 74 times; in Numbers, 29 times; and in Deuteronomy, 10 times. In the entire Bible, “holy” occurs 584 times.) In Leviticus, God says to Israel, “To me, therefore, you shall be holy; for I, the Lord, am holy” (Leviticus 20: 26). A relationship with God can be based on nothing less.

Yet, the human family is not holy: it is steeped in sin and cut off from God. As far back as Genesis 6: 5 we read: “When the Lord saw how great the wickedness of human beings was on earth, and how every desire that their heart conceived was always nothing but evil, the Lord regretted making human beings on the earth, and his heart was

grieved.” In Romans 3: 23, Paul tells us that nothing had changed by his day, for “all have sinned are deprived of the glory of God.” In Paul’s day, as in Genesis, sinful man is a moral pariah, and he cannot approach a holy God. In Leviticus, God begins to bridge the gap.

Leviticus lays out two great pathways to a relationship with God: the first is the *approach* to God through *sacrifice*; the second is the *walk* with God through *sanctification*. Sacrifice comprises chapters 1-10; sanctification, chapters 11-27. The order is important: the five great offerings made by the priests at the Tabernacle—the burnt offering, grain offering, peace offering, sin offering, and guilt offering—establish the basis for relationship with God; the laws that lead to sanctification operate within this sacrificial framework.

In the New Testament, the epistle to the Hebrews offers a detailed commentary on Leviticus, seeing in the sacrifices a foreshadowing of the person and work of Christ:

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer’s ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God.

(Hebrews 9: 11-14)

If we read Leviticus through the lens of the New Testament, we see in the five great sacrifices—and in the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) in chapter 16—the most perfect picture of Christ in the Bible. In the Gospels, we see Christ through men’s eyes; in Leviticus, we see him through God’s eyes.

Leviticus is a thrilling book of tremendous depth and beauty. For a Jewish reader, Leviticus rests at the very heart of *Torah*, God’s most precious gift to his people; for the Christian reader, it sets forth the inner dynamics of salvation and of our relationship with God.

A Note on Method

As we begin our study of Leviticus, we need to lay out some guidelines on how to proceed. In scholarly circles, this is called *hermeneutics*, strictly defined as “the study of the methodological principles of interpretation.”

When we began our verse-by-verse study through the entire Bible, Genesis through Revelation, I noted that the 73 books of the Septuagint canon were written over a period of at least 1,500 years by many different authors, and that nearly all the books had passed through the hands of editors and redactors to become the completed texts that we now have. Although ascribed to Moses within the context of our narrative, Leviticus, for example, developed over many centuries, incorporating rituals and laws from several different periods of Israelite history and religious practices, reaching its final form sometime during the Persian Period, 538-332 B.C.

I went on to insist, however, that the Bible has traditionally been read in its *final, finished form* as a unified literary work, and that it has influenced Western imagination as a unified work. As Professor Northrop Frye argues in his seminal book, *The Great Code: the Bible and Literature*, the Bible has a beginning, middle and end; it has a body of consistent, concrete images; and its unifying principle is one of narrative *shape*. From a literary perspective, the Bible is a unified work, linear in structure: the curtain goes up in Genesis, and it comes down in Revelation; its main character is God; its conflict is sin; and its theme is redemption. This is a foundational principle for anyone approaching the Bible as literature, and much of today’s most insightful and productive scholarship approaches Scripture from this perspective.

And it is an approach imbedded in the text itself. For example, in the Gospel according to John, Jesus concludes a scathing attack on the religious leaders of his day by saying: “Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father: the one who will accuse you is Moses, in whom you have placed your hope. For if you had believed Moses, you would have believed me, because he wrote about me” (John 5: 45-46). And again, in the Gospel according to Luke, we learn that on the evening of Jesus’ resurrection he meets two men on the road to Emmaus. As he talks with them, he says: ““Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24: 25-27). And finally, when Jesus instructs his disciples during the time between his resurrection and ascension, he says: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24: 44).

In all three examples, the New Testament writers read the Hebrew Scriptures as foreshadowing Christ. Let me analyze a specific instance. As we begin Leviticus we read:

The Lord called Moses, and spoke to him from the tent of meeting: "Speak to the Israelites and tell them: When any one of you brings an offering of livestock to the Lord, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock. If a person's offering is a burnt offering from the herd, the offering must be a male without blemish. The individual shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to find favor with the Lord, and shall lay a hand on the head of the burnt offering, so that it may be acceptable to make atonement for the one who offers it . . . [It is] a sweet-smelling oblation ["a sweet savor"] to the Lord."

(Leviticus 1: 1-4; 9)

Then in Isaiah we read:

Yet it was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured. We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted, but he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed. We had all gone astray like sheep, all following our own way; but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all.

(Isaiah 53: 4-6)

St. Paul applies Isaiah's idea of a "sin bearer" to Jesus when he says, "For what the law, weakened by the flesh, was powerless to do, this God has done: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for the sake of sin, he condemned sin in the flesh. (Romans 8: 3). The Greek expression is *peri hamartias*, the regular translation in the LXX for the Hebrew "sin offering" in Leviticus. St. Paul links Leviticus imagery with Jesus again when he says, "So, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a *fragrant aroma*" (Ephesians 5: 1-2). "Fragrant aroma" occurs over forty times in the LXX translation of Torah, and always in a sacrificial context.

The epistle to the Hebrews most explicitly links Jesus with the sacrifices in Leviticus, especially when it says, "He has no need, as did the high priests, to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did that once for all *when he offered himself*" (Hebrews 7: 27); and again: "But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin *by his sacrifice*" (Hebrews 9: 26).

Lest we have any doubt that Leviticus foreshadows and speaks of Christ, we might call to mind John the Baptist's words in the Gospel according to John when he sees Jesus approaching: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1: 29). This is a direct allusion to the sacrifices in Leviticus. By John's day the levitical system of sacrifice was so highly developed and ingrained in Jewish worship that the allusion couldn't be missed. An offering of "the herd or the flock" had been made twice daily in the temple for nearly 1,000 years.

Finally, when we reach Revelation, the allusion is fully developed, as we see John's stunning vision of the throne in heaven:

At once I was caught up in spirit. A throne was there in heaven, and on the throne sat one whose appearance sparkled like jasper and carnelian. Around the throne was a halo as brilliant as an emerald . . . Then I was standing in the midst of the throne . . . a Lamb that seemed to have been slain . . . I looked again and heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They were countless in number, and they cried out in a loud voice:

*“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain
to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength
honor and glory and blessing!”*

*Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth
and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out:*

*“To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor, glory and might,
forever and ever!”*

(Revelation 4: 2-3, 6, 11-13)

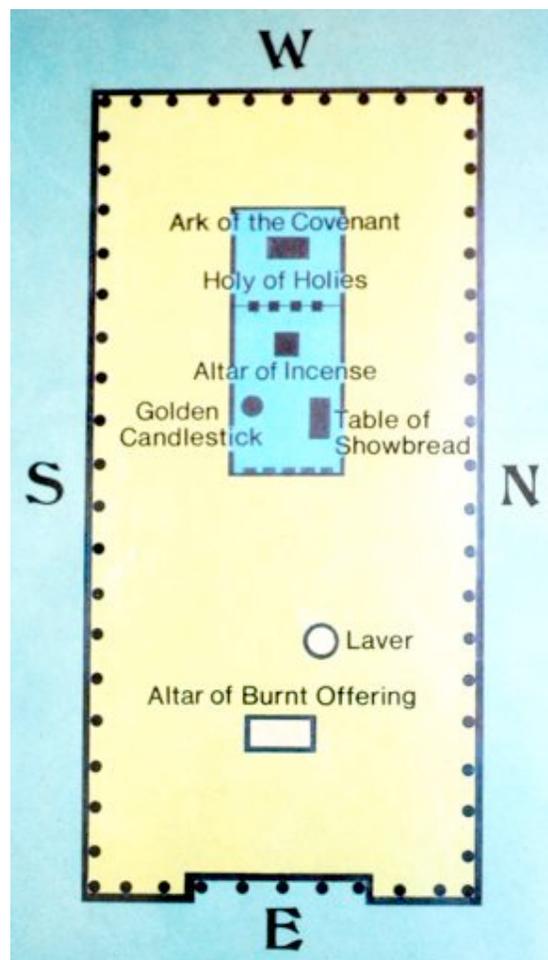
By following one image introduced in Leviticus through the biblical narrative of the Christian canon as we have done (and we have only touched on the most obvious references), one can see the density and the tight weave of Scripture's fabric: every thread is connected to every other thread. That is why it is so important to study the Scripture as a whole. What Leviticus introduces, each following verse, chapter and book develops and brings to fruition.

I need to clarify all of this at the start of Leviticus, for if I don't we will encounter an interpretive can of worms. This is one reason why Leviticus is such a neglected book among Christians: either it is terribly oversimplified (“It's nothing more than ancient rituals and outdated laws”) or one approaches Leviticus from a fragmented and inconsistent hermeneutic that gets one hopelessly tangled in a verbal and theological thicket.

The Five Great Sacrifices

The Book of Leviticus divides into two major sections: Sacrifice (chapters 1-10) and Sanctification (chapters 11-27). The order is important: the five great sacrifices establish the basis for relationship with God; the laws that follow lead to sanctification within the sacrificial framework. Put simply, one must confront sin and deal with it before one can live a life of holiness with God. The very structure of the tabernacle emphasizes this.

The Tabernacle



Entering the Tent of Meeting, one first encounters the Altar of Burnt Offering. Here the five offerings are made. One cannot proceed on to God without them. The sacrificial procedure follows a prescribed sequence which emphasizes the symbolism of the offerings.

- **Sin offering or guilt [“reparation”] offering.**

Sin has to be dealt with first. Both the sin offering and the reparation offering are *non-sweet savor* offerings.

- **Burnt offering and grain offering.**

After dealing with sin, the worshiper commits himself completely to God. The burnt offering is wholly consumed on the altar. Both it and the grain offering are a “*sweet savor unto the Lord.*”

- **Peace [“fellowship” or “communion”] offering.**

After dealing with sin and committing oneself to God, the communion offering symbolizes fellowship with God. It concludes with a communal meal, a sharing of food. Like the burnt offering and the grain offering, the communion offering is a “*sweet savor unto the Lord.*”

Sacrifice was nothing new in the ancient world: virtually every culture had some form of animal sacrifice to its gods. The sacrifices in Leviticus, however, depart radically from those in any other culture. In Leviticus, God uses common religious rituals and raises them to a higher moral and ethical place. The sacrifices in Leviticus serve two purposes. First, they vividly demonstrate the immensity and the seriousness of sin. The sacrifices are steeped in blood and death, and they are repeated daily: the sheer volume of sacrifices calls to mind David, who said, “My sin is always before me” (Psalm 51: 5). Second, they result in fellowship with God. After the offerings are made, sin is covered (Hebrew = *kawfar*), allowing a sinful person to approach God, who is holy.

The sacrificial system introduced in Leviticus presents a “shadow” or a “type” of the sacrifice of Christ. This is most clearly expressed in the epistle to the Hebrews. It says: “The law is only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of them” (10: 1). The epistle to the Hebrews takes the position that “He [Christ] has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice” (9: 26); and “By one offering he [Christ] has made perfect forever those who are being consecrated” (10: 14); and finally, “Therefore, brothers, since through the blood of Jesus we have confidence of entrance into the sanctuary by the new and living way he opened for us through the veil, that is, his flesh, and since we have ‘a great priest over the house of God,’ let us approach with a sincere heart and in absolute trust” (10: 19-22). Such an interpretation is by no means limited to the epistle to the Hebrews. St. Paul says: “God [sent Christ forth] as an expiation, through faith, by his blood” (Romans 3: 25). Sacrifice runs like a scarlet thread through the fabric of Scripture, beginning with Abel's sacrifice in Genesis and climaxing in the blood of the Lamb slain from the creation of the world in Revelation (13: 8). It is a major theme in Scripture. As the epistle to the Hebrews so succinctly puts it: “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (9: 22).

If we view the sacrifices in Leviticus typologically, then the five great sacrifices present a portrait of Christ. The **non-sweet savor offerings** portray the *work* of Christ:

- **Sin offering.**

This pictures Christ atoning for our sin: “The bodies of the animals whose blood the high priest brings into the sanctuary as a sin offering are burned outside the camp. Therefore, Jesus also suffered outside the gate, to consecrate the people by his own blood” (Hebrews 13: 11-12). Or as St. Paul says, God sent “his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh . . . to be a *sin offering*” (Romans 8: 3). As the sin offering is substitutionary in Leviticus, so is the sin offering of Christ substitutionary: “The Lord has laid upon him the guilt of us all” (Isaiah 53: 6).

- **Guilt [or “reparation”] offering.**

This pictures Christ atoning for the *damage* caused by our sin. It focuses not on the sin itself, but on its consequences. Psalm 51: 4 expresses this aspect of the offering very nicely: “Against you [God], you alone have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your eyes so that you are just in your word, and without reproach in your judgment.”

The **sweet savor offerings** portray the *person* of Christ:

- **Burnt offering.**

This pictures Christ offering himself wholly and without blemish to God. The burnt offering is both atoning and substitutionary: Christ dies in our place. Each of the offerings pictures Christ in some aspect of his redeeming character:

- the **bull** speaks of his strength and perfection;

- the **sheep** speaks of his patience and unresisting abandonment to death—[He was led] “like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53: 7);

- the **goat** typifies the sinner and, when used of Christ, it speaks of he who was “counted among the transgressors” (Isaiah 53: 12). As St. Paul says, “For our sake he [God] made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5: 21);

- the **turtledove** or **pigeon** speaks of mourning innocence (Isaiah 38: 14) and the poverty of the one who “for your sake . . . became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8: 9).

- **Grain offering.**

This pictures the perfection of Christ's *humanity*:

- the **fine flour** speaks of his even personality, of the loveliness of Jesus;
- the bread **without yeast** speaks of his total lack of corruption;
- the bread **mingled with oil** speaks of his being anointed by the Holy Spirit;
- the **lack of honey** speaks of his honesty and forthrightness; there is no “sweetness” in him;
- the **salt** speaks of his faithfulness. Salt preserves; the “salt of the covenant” binds one’s word to an agreement.

- **Peace [“fellowship” or “communion”] offering.**

This pictures Christ as our peace. St. Paul says, “He is our peace” (Ephesians 2: 14), and when Jesus leaves his disciples and goes to the cross he says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14: 27).

If we view the sacrifices in Leviticus typologically, we see in them a perfect portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ. As God takes common sacrificial rituals from the ancient world and raises them to a higher moral and ethical plane in Leviticus, so too does he take the sacrifices in Leviticus and raises them to a higher plane in the sacrifice of Christ. What begins in the ancient world with the blood of bulls and goats takes on a profound meaning as it foreshadows in Leviticus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The epistle to the Hebrews summarizes the typology in Leviticus:

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer’s ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God.

(Hebrews 9: 11-14)

As the Israelites gained daily access to God through the repeated bloody sacrifices on the altar of burnt offering, so do we gain access to God *once for all* through the bloody

sacrifice of Christ on the cross. When he spoke his last words—“It is finished” (John 19: 30)—and the spear in his side brought forth a sudden flow of “blood and water” (John 19: 34), “the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mark 15: 38) and he entered “heaven itself, that he might now appear before God on our behalf” (Hebrews 9: 24). There he carries out his ministry for each of us today.

Understanding the sacrifice of Christ from this perspective gives us a profound insight into the meaning of the cross and into the seriousness of sin, the deadly disease for which the cross is the cure. We downplay sin today, seldom speaking of it or glossing over it, even from the pulpit. By doing so we place ourselves in grave danger: ignoring sin in our lives is like ignoring cancer in our bodies. It infects us all, without exception, and it is terminal: it *always* leads to death (James 1: 15). St. Paul tells us Jews and gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: “There is no one just, not one” (Romans 3: 10), for “all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God” (Romans 3: 23). John is more blunt: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1: 8). Both Paul and John speak to each one of us in a brutally honest way. Jesus paid an enormous price when he bore the weight of our sin on his shoulders. As he suffered and died on the cross, we shall never know the depth and the blackness of the water through which he passed to cleanse us. In the sacrifice of Christ, God made good his promise in Isaiah:

*Though your sins be like scarlet,
they may become white as snow:
though they be red like crimson,
they may become white as wool.*

(Isaiah 1: 18)

We need only accept this gift that God has freely given us. Once we do, we may approach the Holy of Holies as new men and women, washed in the blood of Christ and free of sin; once we do, we may take our first steps on the road to holiness and sanctification.

As we study Leviticus 1-10, we are brought ever-closer to the dynamics of redemption, to the transaction of the cross. In Leviticus 1-10 we are skipping on the mountain tops of Scripture, and from our lofty perspective we see a panoramic view of the depth and breadth of God's love.

Important Words for the Study of Leviticus

- Atonement** The Hebrew word *kaphar* means “to cover.” When God commands a person to bring a bull, lamb or dove for a sacrifice “to make atonement,” it is “to cover” his sins—not to take them away. The five great sacrifices in Leviticus 1-5 “cover” sin and foreshadow the final sacrifice of “the Lamb of God, who *takes away* (Greek = αἴρω, to “lift up,” or “take away”) the sin of the world” (John 1: 29). The word “atonement” entered the English language during the sixteenth century A.D. as “at-one-ment”; it is the word that describes how Jesus’ death on the cross makes us “at one” with God by *taking away* our sin.
- Consecration** The Hebrew word *qadash* means “to set apart.” The Septuagint (LXX), the 3rd century B.C. Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, renders the word ἁγιασμός from the root ἅγιος, “holy.” Consecration means “to set apart for God.” The word is *positional*; that is, something or someone is moved from position A to position B.
- Sanctification** The Hebrew word *qudash* is the same as for “consecration,” but when rendered in Greek as ἁγιάζω it suggests the *process* of becoming holy. In Leviticus, Aaron and his sons are first *consecrated* as priests; that is, they move positionally from ordinary men to the position of priest, and then they are *sanctified*; that is, they begin the *process* of becoming priests.
- Clean/unclean** The Hebrew nouns *taharah* and *tumah* (“clean” and “unclean”) refer to ritual “purity” and “impurity.” Neither has anything to do with physical cleanliness. The food in Leviticus 11 is not clean or unclean because of any inherent qualities in it, but because of God’s command. Clean (“pure”) food and objects may be integrated into a “sanctified” life; unclean (“impure”) food and objects may not.
- Leprosy** The Hebrew word *sara’at* (often translated “leprosy” or—in our Catholic Study Bibles—“scaly infection”) is broader than the modern-day Hansen’s disease, *sara’at* in the Bible is a condition that infects people, clothing and even houses. In Scripture, *sara’at* is a symbol or emblem of sin: 1) it becomes overt in loathsome ways; 2) it starts small, as “a swelling or rash or a bright spot”; 3) it advances surely and steadily; 4) it separates us from the community and from God; and 5) if not dealt with it is terminal. In this sense, *sara’at* is a progressive condition, a movement away from life toward death.

Clean and Unclean Foods

After studying Leviticus 11 about clean and unclean foods, several questions arise as to whether these laws apply today.

First, I should reiterate that “clean” and “unclean” have nothing whatever to do with physical cleanliness. The food in Leviticus 11 is not clean or unclean because of any inherent qualities in it, but because of God’s command. Clean food and objects may be integrated into a sanctified life; unclean food and objects may not. “Clean” and “unclean” have to do with holiness, not cleanliness; a better translation, made in the context of ritual, is “pure” and “impure.”

More commonly called the “kosher” laws when they relate to food, (which occurs only in Esther 8: 5, where it means “proper” or “fitting”), these “food” laws are given to Israel directly by God, speaking from within the tabernacle. The laws serve three purposes. First, they are daily reminders to a Jew that he or she belongs to a covenant people who share a unique relationship with God. Second, they isolate the Jews from surrounding cultures, protecting them from assimilation into those cultures. Since an observant Jew cannot share a meal in a non-kosher home, socializing and intermarriage with non-Jews is greatly restricted. And third, the kosher laws have secondary health benefits; keeping kosher is a very healthy way to live. The kosher laws still apply to Jews today: all Orthodox Jews observe them, many Conservative Jews do, and some Reform Jews do. In one sense, how closely a Jew “keeps kosher” is a barometer of his or her commitment to religious Judaism.

Leviticus 11 does *not* apply to Christians. In Mark 7: 14-15; 19. Jesus says:

Hear me all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile . . . (Thus he declared all foods clean).

“Keeping kosher” was a divisive issue in the early Church. In Acts 10: 14, Peter refuses to eat “unclean” food, and it takes a direct command from God to change his mind: even then, he is squeamish. In Galatians 2: 11-14, Paul directs a stinging, public rebuke at Peter, calling him a hypocrite for sometimes keeping the kosher laws and other times not. Paul fully understands that “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2: 16). To Paul's thinking, any practice that detracts from this fundamental Christian tenet is wrong. He argues this strongly throughout his epistle to the Romans, and in chapter 14 he applies the principle to food:

I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. . . For the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the holy Spirit. . . For the sake of food, do not destroy the work of God.

(Romans 14: 14, 17, 20)

Yet, as strongly as Paul holds this belief, he is careful to consider its pastoral implications. Paul tells us that Christians who cling to customs concerning food are spiritually immature. When dealing with such Christians, he says: “One person believes that one may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. The one who eats must not despise the one who abstains, and the one who abstains must not pass judgment on the one who eats; for God has welcomed him” (Romans 14: 2-3). So long as customs concerning food—or anything else—do not obscure the fact that *we are saved by grace through faith in Christ*, and not by following rules and regulations, we are to be tolerant of each other’s practices. But when such practices overshadow what Christ did on the cross by what *we* do or don’t do, we are on theologically thin ice, and we risk crashing through into the frigid waters of self- righteousness and hypocrisy.

The Day of Atonement

If the theme of Leviticus is *holiness*, the anti-theme is *sin*. God calls his people to a life of holiness: “For I, the Lord, am your God. You shall make and keep yourselves holy, because I am holy.” (11: 44). Yet, we are not holy people; we are steeped in sin, every one of us. As Paul says: “All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God” (Romans 3: 23); and John is even more direct: “If we say, ‘We are without sin,’ we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1: 8). We move into Leviticus 16 directly from the three “leprosy” chapters that paint a dramatic and horrible picture of the *condition* of sin. The Hebrew word traditionally translated “leprosy” (or “scaly infection” in our Catholic Study Bibles) is *sara’at*, and as we learn when we study these chapters, it presents a detailed picture of sin: it begins invisibly; it spreads silently; it becomes overt in loathsome ways, and it infects everything it touches. Ultimately it leads toward death. We seldom hear about sin today, yet everything we read in Leviticus focuses on coming to grips with it.

Though sin is dealt with daily in the five great sacrifices at the altar of burnt offering, Leviticus 16 provides a means for dealing with sin that is more comprehensive. It operates against the background of the five great sacrifices; that is, it assumes that the community, priests and individuals participate fully and actively in the daily sacrifices. Chapter 16 provides for an *annual* sacrifice that involves the entire community. Listen to 16: 29-30; 34:

This shall be an everlasting statute for you: on the tenth day of the seventh month every one of you, whether a native or a resident alien, shall humble yourselves and shall do no work. For on this day atonement is made for you to make you clean; of all your sins you will be cleansed before the Lord . . . This, then, shall be an everlasting statute for you: once a year atonement shall be made on behalf of the Israelites for all their sins. And Moses did as the Lord had commanded him.

The annual Day of Atonement (Hebrew=*Yom Kippur*) is a direct command from God, given to Moses in the Tent of Meeting at the foot of Mt. Sinai. It is the most sacred day in the Jewish year. When we reach Leviticus 23, we will discuss how Jews observe it today, for it has changed; here we will focus on how it was originally observed.

On the fourteenth day of the seventh month (that is, *Tishri*, which falls between September and October), all members of the community, both native-born and resident aliens, are to fast. Since the Jewish day begins at sundown (following Genesis 1:5—“And there was evening. and there was morning—the first day.”), and it ends the next evening when three stars appear in the sky, that means a total fast of 24 hours, from evening to evening: no food, no water. The structure of chapter 16 highlights the observance. As I

have done throughout Leviticus, I will point out the Christian typology as we move through the chapter.

Prologue (16: 1-2).

The prologue stresses the extreme seriousness of what is about to happen:

After the death of Aaron's two sons, who died when they encroached on the Lord's presence, the Lord spoke to Moses and said to him: Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he pleases into the inner sanctuary, inside the veil, in front of the cover on the ark, lest he die . . .

Preparation (16: 3-10).

Aaron lays aside the high priest's garments of glory and beauty, bathes himself, and puts on plain garments of white linen. Recall that St. Paul tells us that Jesus, "Who, though he was in the form of God," laid aside his glory, "taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found in human appearance" (Philippians 2: 6-7).

On entering the sanctuary, Aaron brings with him a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. These are for himself and his household. Hebrews 7: 26-27 tells us that Jesus has no need of a sin offering, for he "holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, higher than the heavens."

He also brings from the Israelite community two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He presents the two goats to the Lord at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, where he casts lots for them—one for the Lord, and the other for the scapegoat. (We will explore the "scapegoat" in vv. 20-22.)

Purification (16: 11-19).

Aaron offers the bull that he brought into the sanctuary as a sin offering for himself and his household.

He then takes a censer full of burning coals from the pure gold altar of incense into the Holy of Holies, letting the fragrant smoke fill the room, obscuring the mercy seat, "else he will die" (16: 13). He sprinkles some of the bull's blood on the mercy seat with his finger; he does this seven times, the number symbolizing completeness. The blood sprinkled seven times before God symbolizes complete substitutionary atonement: the sins of the people are atoned for by the blood (or "life") of the bull ("since the

life of all flesh is its blood”—Leviticus 17: 14). As Hebrews 9: 22 says: “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

When Aaron finishes, he comes back outside and slaughters the goat as a sin offering for the people, takes its blood into the Holy of Holies and sprinkles it seven times on the mercy seat, as he did with the bull’s blood. He then sprinkles the goat’s blood on the Tent of Meeting itself, “which is set up among them in the midst of their uncleanness” (16: 16). He does the same thing to the altar of burnt offering.

During the purification, Aaron works in the Tent of Meeting alone; no one may come near it. Likewise, in Jesus “we have such a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister of the sanctuary, the true tabernacle that the Lord, not by man, set up” (Hebrews 8: 1-2).

Dispatch of the Scapegoat (16: 20-22).

When Aaron finishes purifying the Holy of Holies, the Tent of Meeting and the altar of burnt offering—

Aaron shall bring forward the live goat. Laying both hands on its head, he shall confess over it all the iniquities of the Israelites and their trespasses, including all their sins, and so put them on the goat’s head. He shall then have it led into the wilderness by an attendant. The goat will carry off all their iniquities to an isolated place.

(16: 20-22)

The rite of the “scapegoat” has produced an enormous amount of speculation by scholars: it ranges from seeing the scapegoat as a pagan ritual to seeing it as a ransom paid to demons. It is certainly a mythopoeic archetype: James Frazer devotes an entire volume of *The Golden Bough* to the “scapegoat” in the world’s religions; Joseph Campbell treats it, too, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

The Hebrew word translated “scapegoat” is *'aza'zel*, and it is only used once in the Bible: here. Later Jewish theology uses the word as the name of one of the fallen angels, Azazel, in the Book of Enoch (Enoch is not a book of the Bible; it was written around 200 B.C., and is part of the *Pseudepigrapha*, a collection of sixty-three works on biblical themes written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200). William Tyndale, the Protestant reformer and Bible translator, first rendered *'aza'zel* as “scapegoat,” following the Greek LXX by properly translating *'az* as “goat” and *'azel* as a form of the verb “to go away”; hence *'aza'zel* is the “go away goat,” or “scapegoat.”

The two goats represent one offering, each goat representing one aspect of that offering. The goat slain is a sin offering. In Christian typology, God made Jesus “to be sin who did not know sin” (2 Corinthians 5: 21); God sent “his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh for the sake of sin” (Romans 8: 3); and “you were ransomed...with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1: 18-19). The second goat recalls Isaiah 53: 4-6:

Yet it was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured. We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted, but he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole; by his wounds we are healed. We had all gone astray like sheep, all following our own way; but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all.

Aftermath (16: 23--28).

Aaron goes into the Tent of Meeting, takes off his linen garments, bathes himself, and puts on the high priest’s garments. He then sacrifices the remaining offerings for himself and the people, both the burnt offering and the sin offering. The hide, flesh, and offal of the sin offerings are taken outside the camp and burnt. The man who releases the “scapegoat” and the man who burns the remains of the sin offerings must then wash their clothes and bathe.

Epilogue (16: 29-34).

God makes the great Day of Atonement—*Yom Kippur*—a lasting ordinance for the people of Israel. *Yom Kippur* predates Christianity by nearly 1,500 years, and Jews observe it to this day. In Christian typology, *Yom Kippur* pictures the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Of all the typology in the Hebrew Scriptures, Leviticus 16 most closely portrays the dynamic of redemption, the transaction of the cross.

The Atonement

In traditional Christianity, the typology of Leviticus 16 takes us directly into the very complex issue of the atonement. “Atonement” is the English rendering of the Hebrew verb *kaphar* “to cover.” The sacrifices of Leviticus 16 “cover” the sins of Israel. For all practical purposes, they are removed from God's sight, for he says: “For on this day *atonement* [*kaphar*] is made for you to make you clean; of all your sins you will be

cleansed [*taher*, “pure”] before the Lord” (16: 30). In the New Testament, the epistle to the Hebrews sees in Leviticus 16 a type or “shadow” of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross:

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is not belonging to this creation, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

(Hebrews 9: 11-12).

The word “atonement” in our English translations derives from the Middle English “at-one-ment”; hence, “atonement” is the means by which we become “at one” with God. The atonement—as a theological issue—addresses how “at-one-ment” happens. In a very important sense, the atonement is the most important issue in the Bible. It is also a critical issue for each one of us today, for how we understand the atonement determines the very nature of our relationship with God and how we live our lives in his presence.

The Bible does not present a philosophical discussion of the atonement, although it does give a great deal of information about it. We might summarize what the Bible says in this fashion:

- The atonement is an accomplished and completed fact (Hebrews 9: 13-26);
- The atonement is essential to human salvation (Luke 24: 41-47; Acts 4: 12);
- Although the entire earthly life of Jesus contained an atoning and even sacrificial element, the virtue of the atonement is found chiefly in his death on the cross: Jesus' death is *indispensable* to our salvation (John 3: 14-15);
- In the atoning death of Christ, God exhibited not only wrath against sin but love toward sinful humanity (Romans 3: 25-26; 5: 6-8; John 3: 16);
- Redemption was in the thought and plan of God from the very beginning; when man fell, he fell into the arms of divine mercy: the Lamb of God was slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13: 8; 1 Peter 1: 19-20);
- The atonement is not limited, but universal; it applies to the entire human family (Hebrews 2: 9; 1 Timothy 2: 5-6; Romans 5: 18; 2 Corinthians 5: 14-15);
- Although the atonement is universal, salvation is not. God's offer of salvation may be—and often is—rejected; when the rejection is final, atonement counts for nothing (Mark 16: 16; John 3: 36; Hebrews 10: 26-29);
- The atonement is the objective ground for the forgiveness of sins and acceptance by God (John 3: 16; Acts 2: 38; Ephesians 1: 7; Colossians 1: 14).

Interpreting what the Bible says about the atonement has taken three directions during the history of the Church, and those three directions still dominate today. A fanciful notion has also surfaced periodically that the death of Jesus was a ransom paid to Satan to redeem men who had come under his power. Origen (A.D. 230) taught this, as did Gregory of Nyssa (A.D. 370). Although prominent at times, this idea was always met with the strongest opposition and was never accepted as Church doctrine.

The first serious understanding of the atonement might be called the **Satisfaction Theory**. St. Anselm (A.D. 1100) stands as its strongest proponent. In his book *Cur Deus Homo* he views the atonement as satisfying divine justice: man sinned, and a penalty must be paid. Although God is love, he is also justice, and the requirements of divine justice must be satisfied before God's salvation can be granted. Anselm illustrates his theory with an analogy: When Christ bore the punishment for our sins, he literally paid a debt in the manner of a commercial transaction. Carried to its logical conclusion, however, such reasoning leads either to a limited atonement or to universal salvation, both of which pose enormous philosophical and theological problems, not to mention that they flatly contradict the Bible.

The second understanding of the atonement might be called the **Moral Influence Theory**. Abelard (A.D. 1100), St. Anselm's chief opponent, stands as its strongest supporter. Abelard rooted the atonement squarely in the love of God, teaching that nothing in God's essence required satisfaction for sin: God is love, period. The suffering and death of Christ on the cross is the purest example of God's love; hence, its effect is principally moral. It was intended to soften the hearts of sinful men and to lead them to repentance and devotion to Christ. To my thinking, the moral influence theory, though containing a profound truth (God is love), falls far short of adequately representing what the Bible teaches. It leaves out the fact—stressed in Leviticus and throughout Scripture—of a real, objective basis for atonement, and by doing so reduces the suffering and death of Jesus to an object lesson. Even so, many people in the church today—both Catholics and Protestants—aspire to the moral influence theory of the atonement, especially among the more liberal movements and denominations.

The third understanding of the atonement might be called the **Governmental Theory**. Grotius (A.D. 1617) is its chief proponent. Writing against those who denied the vicarious character of Christ's death, Grotius held fast to Jesus as our "sin bearer," but he viewed the vicarious nature of Jesus' suffering and death as meeting a requirement of *moral government*, not some rigid sense of justice inherent in God's character. This is a subtle, but important distinction. According to Grotius, Jesus' suffering and death on the cross *in our place* makes it possible for God to exercise divine mercy, while at the same time it protects the dignity of the Law, the honor of God, and the moral interests of the universe. As a theory, Grotius's position is appealing, for in one sense it reconciles the satisfaction and moral influence theories. Held to strongly, though, the governmental theory loses sight of the fact that divine government must be a reflection of God's divine nature, and hence, what is required by divine government must also be required by divine nature. Further, if taken to its logical conclusion, the governmental theory degenerates

into a cosmic moral spectacle, becoming—in effect—just another approach at a moral influence theory.

Today theologians seek ways of mediating between or uniting these three theories, for each one alone inadequately represents the fullness of what the Bible teaches. Clearly, Scripture represents the death of Christ as a profound manifestation of God’s love; yet, it also represents his sacrificial death as *required* by God’s justice. It is equally clear that Christ being nailed to the cross *in our place* satisfies the requirements of divine law and the moral economy that God has established.

As we struggle with Leviticus 16 and with the atonement, we would do well to remember Paul’s advice to the Corinthians before we take a strong position:

When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known.

(1 Corinthians 13:11-12)

When we encounter the atonement—that dynamic that allows sinful man to be “at one” with God—we enter an arena where finite man struggles to understand an infinite God. It is no easy task, and no simple answer will suffice.

If we turn back to Scripture, the Gospel according to Matthew gives us a place to rest our inquiry. Matthew is a very precise and careful narrator, giving us full details throughout his gospel of what Jesus said and did. When he reaches the cross, however—the place where the atonement takes place—the narrative changes: it becomes sparse:

As they were going out they met a Cyrenian named Simon; this man they pressed into service to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of the Skull), they gave Jesus wine to drink mixed with gal. But when he had tasted it, he refused to drink. After they had crucified him, they divided his garments by casting lots; then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And they placed over his head the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.

(Matthew 27: 32-37)

Notice that we do not actually see Jesus crucified. They offer him a drink, but he refuses it; then we read: “After they had crucified him...” “The crucifixion itself takes place between the lines. The atonement—what actually happens on the cross—is similar. In Matthew, it is a private matter between the Father in heaven and the Son on the cross. Prying eyes are not privy to it. True, those loitering about the cross mock him and heap

insults on him, but from the sixth hour to the ninth, God lowers a mantle of darkness over the scene and the transaction between Father and Son takes place. It is as if God says: “This is something you cannot look at. It is beyond human understanding. The suffering cannot be comprehended.”

I cannot imagine a greater demonstration of God’s love, nor can I imagine a more profound sacrifice—in the Levitical sense of that word. Yet, I am at a loss as to how to explain what happened *precisely*. God placed a mantle of darkness over the atonement, and we simply cannot see it in all its details. To pretend that we can is arrogance and idle speculation. So I leave it to rest. I do know, however, that what transpired on the cross dealt with the issue of sin once and for all: this is clear throughout Scripture. We can add *nothing* to the completed work of Christ. John—who was there at the foot of the cross—tells us that at the end, Jesus said quietly and simply: “It is finished.” And with that he died. At the same moment the curtain of the temple—the one separating the holy place from the Holy of Holies—was torn in two from top to bottom, giving sinful man access to God once for all.

Jewish Festivals

The Bible discusses Jewish festivals—or holidays—in several places. A short holiday calendar appears in Exodus 23: 14-18 and 34: 18-25, with a fuller statement in Deuteronomy 16: 1-16. These passages speak only of the three pilgrimage festivals: Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks and Feast of Booths. Leviticus 23 adds the Feast of First Fruits; the Feast of Trumpets—later called *Rosh Hashanah*, and the Day of Atonement, or *Yom Kippur*. Leviticus 23 offers the most complete list of festivals. Numbers 28: 1-30: 1 supplements it, giving a detailed schedule of the sacrifices performed on each occasion. Passover is presented in-depth in Exodus 12-13 and *Yom Kippur* in Leviticus 16.

Sabbath (Leviticus 23: 3)

Although technically not a festival, the Sabbath—or *Shabbat*—stands at the head of Jewish religious observance, providing a point of reference for all the other festivals (literally, *Shabbat* means “rest”). *Shabbat* begins at sundown on Friday night and ends on Saturday night when three stars appear in the sky. (The Jewish day *always* begins at sundown, reflecting Genesis 1: 5: “Evening came and morning followed—the first day.”) *Shabbat* is rooted in Genesis 2: 1-3. By observing it, one fulfills the fourth of the Ten Commandments:

Remember the Sabbath day—keep it holy. Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God. You shall not do any work, either you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your work animal, or the resident alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord has blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy;

(Exodus 20: 8-11),

Shabbat has two basic purposes. First, by observing it, one honors God: he rested on the Sabbath, and he asks his people to do the same. And second, by observing it, one expresses the freedom and dignity of the human person: we are not to be enslaved by our work.

Celebrating *Shabbat* has profound meaning for a Jewish family. Unlike Christianity which is centered in the Church, Jewish life is centered in the home. *Shabbat* reflects this subtle but important difference. Preparation for *Shabbat* begins on Friday afternoon and involves cleaning the house, shopping for dinner (and buying *hallot*,

two round, braided loaves of bread), bathing and putting on clean clothes, setting the *Shabbat* table (with a clean, white tablecloth, china, *kiddush* cup(s), fresh flowers, and a *tzedakah* box—a container for money, which is collected before the Sabbath begins and is later given to the poor). At sundown the family and guests gather around the dinner table. The *Shabbat* service includes nine elements:

- **Candle Lighting.**

Shabbat begins when the woman of the house lights the candles. With her head covered she circles the flames with her hands three times, symbolically bringing the warmth and light of the Sabbath to herself and to those gathered around the table. After a pause, she says the blessing. Everyone at the table then wishes each other “*Shabbat Shalom*,” with hugs, kisses and handshakes.

- **Singing *Shalom Aleikheim*** (“Peace be with You”).

This is a traditional song welcoming the Sabbath and guests at the table.

- **Blessing the Family.**

The man of the house first blesses the children by placing his hands on their heads and saying the traditional blessing for sons: “May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh,” and for daughters: “May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.” This is followed for all children by the blessing from Numbers 6: 24-26, “May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his face toward you and give you peace.” The father also usually hugs each child and whispers something personal to each one. The husband then blesses his wife with a selection from Proverbs 31: 10-31, which praises the “Woman of Valor”; the wife then blesses her husband with a reading from Psalm 112, “Happy is the Man.” Some families use readings from the Song of Songs for the family blessing. The blessing closes by including all at the table: “May the Merciful One bless all of us together with the blessing of peace.”

- **Singing the *Kiddush* Prayer.**

Wine is poured in the *Kiddush* cup (*Kiddush* is from *kadosh*, “holy”); each adult at the table has a *kiddush* cup, though the head of the household may have a special one that has been passed down through generations or that has been bought in Israel. All stand, and the head of the household begins by raising his cup and saying, “With the permission of friends...” He then recites the words from Genesis 2: 1-3, the blessing over the wine, and the prayer that sanctifies the day.

- **Washing the Hands.**

This is a ritual washing, much as a priest does as he moves into the Liturgy of the Eucharist during a Roman Catholic Mass. A special pitcher and basin is used. Washing is done in silence, in anticipation of the blessing of the bread. Everyone at the table washes.

- **Blessing the Bread.**

Two loaves of *hallah* are used, symbolic of the double portion of manna that fell on *Shabbat* during the Exodus. *Hallah* means a round loaf or cake. It is braided and often filled with raisins. The loaves are kept covered with a cloth until the blessing. This is symbolic of the manna being covered by dew until morning. (A popular explanation for children says that the *hallot* are covered so they won't get jealous during the blessing of the lights and wine!) As each person at the table holds the *hallah*, they say the blessing: "Praised are you, Adonai, our God, ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." Then everyone pulls the *hallah* apart.

- **Eating the Meal**

There is no prescribed *Shabbat* meal, though many Jewish families include traditional gefilte fish, chicken soup or meat. It is important that the meal be festive, not the usual food served during the week; the meal need not be expensive. The *Shabbat* meal is a time of fellowship with family and friends and should reflect such a joyous and happy occasion.

- **Singing after the Meal**

There are many traditional *Shabbat* songs, and the meal concludes with a hearty round of them.

- **Blessing after Food.**

Christians say grace at the beginning of a meal; we thank God "for what we are about to receive." Jews also pray at the beginning of the *Shabbat* meal (blessing the lights, wine and bread, as well as those gathered around the table), but the major blessing comes after the meal is finished. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people that God will bring them into a new land, a land of milk and honey. And then he says,

But when you have eaten and are satisfied, you must bless the Lord, your God, for the good land he has given you. Be careful not to forget the Lord, your God, by failing to keep his commandments and ordinances and statutes which I enjoin on you today; lest when

you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built fine houses and lived in them, and your herds and flocks have increased, and all your property has increased, you then become haughty of heart and forget the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that house of slavery.

(Deuteronomy 8: 10-14)

The prayer that closes *Shabbat* dinner flows from these verses and stresses four themes: 1) the blessing for food, 2) the blessing for the land, 3) the blessing for Jerusalem, and 4) the blessing and remembrance of God's goodness. The four themes form a "salvation history" of the Jewish people, affirming God's positive role in nature, Israel, the temple in Jerusalem, and the positive outcome of history at the end of time. The prayer closes with:

May the Merciful One give us as an inheritance a day that is completely Shabbat, and rest in life everlasting in the world to come. Then shall we receive blessing from Adonai and justice from the God of our deliverance. May we find favor and good understanding in the eyes of God and people. He who makes peace in his heaven, may he make peace for us and for all Israel and let us say. Amen.

After dinner, many Jewish families go to synagogue, or they may wait until Saturday morning. *Shabbat* services on Saturday last about three hours; they are shorter on Friday evening.

As Christians look back with warm memories to Christmas with family and friends, to crackling logs in a fireplace, hauling home the Christmas tree, and the smell of nutmeg and cinnamon, turkey and stuffing, so does a Jew hold warm memories of *Shabbat*, of candles and white tablecloths, china and flowers, songs and laughter, and the smell of chicken soup and warm bread. Celebrated weekly, *Shabbat* rests at the heart of Jewish life as the Mass rests at the heart of Roman Catholic life: each week leads into it and each flows out of it. Both include common elements: blessing over the wine, blessing and breaking of the bread, song and prayer, and fellowship with God and man. In the early Church the Eucharist was celebrated in exactly this way—as part of a larger meal. Only later did it become ritualized, as it is today. To understand the Jewish festivals listed in Leviticus 23, one must view them against the experience of *Shabbat* in the Jewish family and community. Appropriately, then, Leviticus 23 begins with *Shabbat*, and then it moves into the festivals themselves.

Spring Festivals:

Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread, First fruits, Feast of Weeks.

The first two festivals—Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread and First fruits—occur within eight days; the third—the Feast of Weeks, later called Pentecost—follows fifty days after the Feast of First fruits. All are springtime festivals, marking the beginning of life, in both a physical and symbolic sense.

Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23: 4-8)

In Jewish life Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, though technically separate feasts, are treated as one. As Leviticus says, “The Passover of the Lord falls on the fourteenth day of the first month, at the evening twilight. The fifteenth day of this month is the Lord’s feast of Unleavened Bread. For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread” (Leviticus 23: 5-6).

Passover, of course, celebrates God freeing his people from Egyptian slavery. As the story is told in Exodus 12-13, the Israelites are to stay indoors, slay a lamb without defect, put some of the blood on the door frames of each Israelite house, and then roast the lamb and eat it. On that same night, says God, “I will go through Egypt, striking down every firstborn in the land, human being and beast alike, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt—I, the Lord. But for you the blood will mark the houses where you are. Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thereby, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you” (12: 12-13). The next verses establish the Feast of Unleavened Bread: “This day will be a day of remembrance for you, which your future generations will celebrate with pilgrimage to the Lord; you will celebrate it as a statute forever. For seven days you must eat unleavened bread. From the very first day you will have your houses clear of all leaven. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh will be cut off from Israel. On the first day you will hold a sacred assembly, and likewise on the seventh. On these days no sort of work shall be done, except to prepare the food that everyone needs.” (12: 14-16).

Passover is the oldest religious feast among any of the world’s religions. In Christianity, Passover becomes Good Friday/Easter, the time when Jesus, the “Lamb of God,” is slain for the sins of the world and is then resurrected on Sunday morning. Recall that as Jesus moves toward the cross during Holy Week, he and his disciples are in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Good Friday/Easter *exactly* parallels Passover/Exodus, in the manner of stepped-up parallelism that we so frequently see in the New Testament.

In a Jewish home, preparation for Passover/Unleavened Bread begins days—or even weeks—before the actual holiday by thoroughly cleaning the house, washing windows and curtains, and even painting. As the holiday approaches, people turn to the utensils used during Passover, they polish brass and silver and scrub pots and pans, dishes and cutlery. Since Passover always occurs during early spring, one could think of this as spring house cleaning! Thoroughly cleaning the house also ensures that all traces of yeast—or *hametz*—is removed so it doesn’t accidentally make its way into the Passover

food. On the night before Passover, adults and children inspect the house for any speck of *hametz*. This involves a charming Passover tradition: The house is darkened, and each child carries a candle as he searches for *hametz*; when he finds some—which he does, since the parents leave some behind—all cheer and congratulate him.

The actual Passover celebration begins on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month with the *Seder* dinner. This is the dinner that Jesus and his disciples celebrated in the upper room the night before his crucifixion. *Seder* means “order,” and the dinner follows a prescribed order that is detailed in a Passover *Haggadah*, a small book that tells exactly how to run the *Seder* and that retells the Passover story. Each person has a copy next to his or her plate. The table also includes a *Seder* plate—a large plate that is divided into five sections. Each section contains a symbolic food:

- *Karpas*—A green vegetable such as parsley, which is dipped in salt water before eating. The parsley recalls springtime; the salt water recalls the tears shed by the Israelites as slaves in Egypt and the suffering of the Jewish people over the centuries.
- *Maror*—A bitter herb such as horseradish, which recalls the bitter days of slavery.
- *Roasted egg*—Animal sacrifice ended with the destruction of the Second Temple in AD. 70. The roasted egg recalls the sacrifices made at the temple during festivals in the early centuries of Judaism.
- *Roasted lamb shank*—This recalls the lamb that was slain and roasted in each household before the Israelites left Egypt.
- *Haroset*—A mixture of ground walnuts, grated apples, sugar and wine, which recalls the mortar used to make Pharaoh's cities of bricks.

The Passover *Seder* follows this order:

- Lighting the candles.
- Blessing the wine and drinking the first of four cups.
- Washing the hands.
- Dipping the parsley in salt water and eating it.
- Breaking the bread.

At Passover the bread is unleavened—or *matzoth*—instead of the delicious Sabbath *hallah*. There are three matzos on the table, stacked and covered with a cloth. A delightful tradition has developed at this part of the *Seder*. The leader breaks the middle *matzoth* and hides a piece, “putting it away for later.” This piece is called the *aftkoman*. The children are encouraged to “steal” the *aftkoman* sometime during the meal. After the meal ends, the child who has “stolen” it returns it for extra dessert. This keeps the children awake and interested during the lengthy *Seder*; it also adds a sense of festivity, joy and laughter to the meal.

- Telling the Passover story.

After breaking the *matzoth*, the leader refers to it as the “bread of affliction” and expresses hope that all those who are afflicted will see freedom in the coming year. The youngest child at the table then asks: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” This begins the retelling of the Passover story. At the conclusion of the story, the second cup of wine is drunk.

- Eating the meal.
- Drinking the third cup of wine.

In addition to all those present, a cup of wine is filled for Elijah the Prophet and the outside door is opened to welcome “the messenger of redemption.” Recall how the Hebrew Scriptures close: “Now, I am sending to you Elijah the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible day. He will turn the heart of fathers to their sons, and the heart of sons to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with utter destruction” (Malachi 3: 23-24).

- Singing the Hallel Psalms.

When the meal is over, grace is said, and then the Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118) are sung. These are the psalms that Jesus and his disciples sang when they finished their Passover *Seder* (which we call the Last Supper): “Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Matthew 26: 30). The final cup of wine is drunk after the Hallel psalms are sung.

- Closing prayer.

First Fruits (Leviticus 23: 9-14)

The Feast of First Fruits is closely allied to Passover/Unleavened Bread. Passover begins “at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month” (23: 5), and the Feast of Unleavened Bread begins on the fifteenth day and continues for seven days (23: 6). The entire eight days of Passover/Unleavened Bread is usually referred to as simply Passover. The Feast of First Fruits, then, follows in sequence, beginning on “the day after the Sabbath” (23: 15); in Christian parallel, it falls on Easter. It also coincides with the start of the barley harvest in Israel. Leviticus 23: 9-14 provides that the first sheaf--or *ormer*--is presented as an offering at the sanctuary. None of the new crop could be eaten until the *ormer* had been offered.

First Fruits is important because it dates the next major festival, the Feast of Weeks, or *Shavuot*. Leviticus 23: 15-16 says: “Beginning with the day after the Sabbath, the day on which you bring the sheaf for elevation, you shall count seven full weeks; you shall count the day after the seventh week, fifty days. Then you shall present a new grain offering to the Lord.” *Shavuot* brought the spring harvest to a close. In later Biblical times *Shavuot* also celebrated the anniversary of the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, which we read about in Exodus and Leviticus. The LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, refers to the fifty days between Passover and *Shavuot* as

pentekonta hemeras, from which we get the term *Pentecost*. Pentecost, then, originally meant *Shavu*, one of three Jewish pilgrimage festivals. When we read in the beginning of Acts that “there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem” (2: 5), we understand that they were there for *Shavuot*—the Festival of Pentecost. Acts 2:1 simply states: “When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they (the disciples) were all in one place together.” Pentecost became a Christian holiday only *after* the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2; before that, it was a Jewish festival, as it continues to be today. In the Old Testament, Pentecost marks the birth of Israel as a covenant community under Law; in the New Testament it marks the birth of the Church as a covenant community under Grace.

Notice the Jewish/Christian parallels in these first three festivals. Jesus and his disciples come to Jerusalem for Passover, as they should for a pilgrimage festival. Jesus celebrates the Passover *Seder* with his friends in the upper room. He gives new meaning to two important elements of the Seder meal: unleavened bread and wine. The day of Passover, Jesus—the Lamb of God—is crucified. The day after the Sabbath—or the Feast of First Fruits—is the day of Jesus’ resurrection. On Easter, Paul says, “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15: 20). Jesus stays among us for forty days and then is taken up into heaven; ten days later—at Pentecost, the feast marking the birth of Israel as a covenant community under law—the Holy Spirit descends in what appear to be tongues of fire (as God descends in fire on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19: 16-19), marking the birth of the Church as a covenant community under grace. The parallels are stunning in both structure and symbol, offering a beautiful example of the stepped-up parallelism that is such an important literary feature of the Bible.

Autumn Festivals:

Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles

As the three spring festivals are intimately related, so are the autumn festivals. The spring festivals span fifty-eight days and reflect joy in God’s salvation of his people, Israel; the autumn festivals sound a more somber note: they are more reflective, a serious time of seeking forgiveness, of making amends with one’s neighbor, and of starting anew.

Feast of Trumpets (*Rosh Hashanah*) (Leviticus 23: 23-25).

The Feast of Trumpets takes up only two verses in the Bible:

The Lord said to Moses: Tell the Israelites: On the first day of the seventh month you will have a sabbath rest, with trumpet blasts as a reminder, a declared holy day; you shall do no heavy work, and you shall offer an oblation to the Lord.

Later in Jewish history, the Feast of Trumpets becomes *Rosh Hashanah* (literally, “head of the year”). Although it begins on the first day of the seventh month, it is the Jewish New Year. This is not so strange: the Christian New Year begins on Advent Sunday, four Sundays before Christmas; the academic New Year begins the day after Labor Day, the ninth month; and for many, the fiscal New Year begins July 1st, the seventh month.

Rosh Hashanah technically begins on the eve of the first day (since a Jewish day is measured from sunset to sunset), and it begins in the synagogue with the blowing of the ram’s horn, or *shofar*. To a Jew, the loud blast of the *shofar* is a haunting sound, rich with meaning: for all but Orthodox Jews, it is blown only on the eve of *Rosh Hashanah* and the beginning and end of *Yom Kippur*. The ram’s horn goes back to Genesis 22, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. There, Abraham believes that God wants him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. He and Isaac travel three days to Moriah and they prepare for the sacrifice. Abraham places Isaac on the altar, raises the knife above him, and prepares to plunge it into his chest. At that instant, God stops his hand, saying, “Do not lay your hand on the boy . . . do not do the least thing to him” (22: 12). According to the rabbis, the instant God stops Abraham’s hand, Judaism is born. It marks the God of Israel as radically different from any other god in the surrounding cultures, all of whom demand such sacrifices. Instead of Isaac, God provides a ram “caught by its horns for the sacrifice.” Thus, the blowing of the ram’s horn ushers in the New Year, a new beginning. It symbolizes the birth of Judaism and the beginning of another year as God’s chosen people.

Rosh Hashanah also starts the count to *Yom Kippur*, which begins nine days later, on the tenth day of the seventh month. Although *Rosh Hashanah* begins cheerfully with a holiday meal, apples dipped in honey (symbolic of a “sweet” new year), and people wishing each other *shana tovah*, (“happy New Year”), it quickly sounds a more serious note. The ten days starting with *Rosh Hashanah* and ending with *Yom Kippur* are called *Asseret Yemey Tstwva*, literally “the ten days of return.” It is a time of penance, of recognizing one’s failings, and of asking both man and God for forgiveness. If a Jew has sinned, injuring or hurting another person he or she is to go to that person during the days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, ask for forgiveness, and if possible, make restitution. As the year begins anew, so should one’s spiritual life begin anew. A lovely tradition accompanies *Rosh Hashanah*: on the afternoon of the New Year, Jews practice *Tashlich* (literally, “you will cast”), a ceremony of going to a river, praying, and emptying one’s pockets of lint and crumbs. As the water carries away the lint and crumbs that accumulate over the year, so does it represent one’s sins being carried away.

It is important to understand that a Jew must ask forgiveness of his neighbor *before* asking forgiveness of God on *Yom Kippur*. In Jewish thinking, it would be absurd—and an insult to God—if I were to ask *him* to forgive me for hurting *you*. I must go to you first, *then* to him. This is exactly the thinking that Jesus draws on when he says: “If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5: 23-24). In Christian tradition, Lent parallels the days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) (Leviticus 23: 26-32)

When we study Leviticus 16, we cover *Yom Kippur* in detail. There, atonement involves animal sacrifice and the scapegoat; here, I would like to look at how Jews celebrate *Yom Kippur* today.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of Yom Kippur in the life of the Jewish people. Even Jews who are indifferent to religion respond to its call and flock to the synagogue, much as indifferent Christians show up at church on Christmas and Easter. The music, prayers, and liturgy of *Yom Kippur* are sublime. The day changes lives. The Roman Catholic, Aime Palliere, began his pilgrimage to Judaism as the result of entering a synagogue on *Yom Kippur* afternoon, and Franz Rosenzweig, a brilliant young German Jew who was about to become a Christian, became one of the noblest teachers of modern Jewry following *Yom Kippur* spent in an Orthodox synagogue in Berlin in 1913.

Yom Kippur reaches to the deepest recesses of the human spirit, seeking to bring each person into harmony with others and with God. It is not a day that reflects national or ethnic loyalties. Non-Jews who participate in *Yom Kippur* services will not feel like outsiders, like they have forsaken their own religious loyalties.

Yom Kippur begins on the evening of the tenth day of the seventh month with the blowing of the *shofar*. As the sun goes down a complete fast begins: no food, no water. This continues for twenty-four hours, until three stars appear in the sky the next evening. Synagogue services begin after sundown with the beautiful *Kol Nidre* prayer, literally, “all vows.” Set to music, *Kol Nidre* asks God for forgiveness for promises made to him that have been broken and for promises that have been made through coercion. For a Christian at *Yom Kippur* services, the latter is especially heartbreaking, for it entered the prayer during the Middle Ages, when the Church converted Jews by means of torture and death. *Kol Nidre* asks God to forgive those who were not strong enough to resist. By the end of the prayer, many people are in tears. After evening services, most people go home, but those who are especially devout spend the night in the synagogue in prayer. In the manner of stepped-up parallelism, we see Jesus doing the same thing in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he is crucified, the night before he makes atonement (literally, *kippur*) for each of us, in the fullest sense of the word.

The next day is spent entirely in the synagogue, and it includes four services: *Shaharit*, morning; *Musaj*, additional; *Minhdh*, afternoon; and *Neilah*, late afternoon. Services also include *Yizkor*, memorial prayers for the dead. Jonah provides the principal reading during *Neilah*, for it includes two important lessons: 1) God gives us a second chance, even after we willfully disobey him (“the word of the Lord came to Jonah *a second time*” –Jonah 3: 1) and 2) God’s forgiveness is not for Jews alone; it is offered to the entire human family (“Then the Lord said: ‘You are concerned over the gourd plant

which cost you no effort and which you did not grow; it came up in one night and in one night it perished. And should I not be concerned over the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot know their right hand from their left, not to mention the animals?” (Jonah 4: 10-11).

Yom Kippur draws to a close at sundown, with the blowing of the *shofar* and the cry, “Next year in Jerusalem.” Worshipers leave the synagogue and head for home, where a light dinner is prepared.

Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkoth*) (Leviticus 23: 33--43)

The Feast of Tabernacles, or *Sukkoth*, begins on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, five days after *Yom Kippur*, and it continues for seven days. As *Rosh Hashanah* marks the New Year and *Yom Kippur* stresses atonement, *Sukkoth* remembers the wanderings in the desert after the Exodus. The sequence is important: first, we begin anew by setting things right with our fellow man; next, we come to a right relationship with God by asking his forgiveness; finally, we start on our journey as pilgrims and exiles in this world, heading for the promised land. The symbolism of the three holidays interlocks and resonates with meaning.

Sukkoth is a joyous holiday, filled with festive food and activities. An autumn festival, *Sukkoth* also celebrates the fall harvest. Leviticus 23: 40 says: “On the first day you shall gather fruit of majestic trees, branches of palms, and boughs of leafy trees and valley willows. Then for a week you shall make merry before the Lord, your God.” This has developed into the tradition of the “Four Species,” four different types of growing things that represent all growing things in the world. They include a *lulav*, the youngest shoot of a palm tree; a *willow branch*; a *myrtle branch*; and an *etrog*, a fruit that looks like a lemon, but is larger. The willow and myrtle branches are tied around the *lulav*, and the *etrog* is kept in a special decorative box. In the synagogue, worshipers enter in procession with the branches, and services include thanksgiving for the harvest and prayers for continued blessings throughout the year.

Sukkoth also entails the building of booths (*sukkoth* means “booth”). This follows from Leviticus 23: 42-43: “You shall dwell in booths for seven days; every native-born Israelite shall dwell in booths, that your descendants may realize that, when I led the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, I made them dwell in booths. I, the Lord, am your God.” During *Sukkoth*, every Jewish family builds a *sukkah* outdoors, a small building about 8' x 12'. Three of the walls are made of plywood, and the front is open. The open roof is covered with evergreen branches, corn stalks, or other natural material, separated enough so that one can see the stars through them at night. Building the *sukkah* is a family affair, and children are actively—and enthusiastically—involved. Once it is built, the children decorate it with fruits and vegetables, drawings, holiday cards, and anything else they can think of to add beauty and a sense of family tradition. Decorating a *sukkah* parallels the way Christians decorate a Christmas tree. When it is ready, a Jewish family eats their evening meal in the *sukkah*, and often the children spend the night in it—a

backyard sleep out, as it were. Building the *sukkah* and “living in it” reminds the Jewish family of their heritage, of the wanderings in the desert, of their forefathers, who were mostly farmers and shepherds, and of the centuries of being a people without a home. History has taught the Jews that even those who are most secure can become homeless overnight: a five bedroom home in Beverly Hills can become a “booth” in the blink of an eye.

Conclusion

The six festivals prescribed in Leviticus 23 provide God’s people with a rich tradition and a profound sense of identity. They are rooted first of all in Israel’s unique relationship with God and in how that relationship has manifested itself throughout history. Secondly, they reflect the spring and autumn agricultural seasons, the cycles of the year in which people live out their day-to-day lives. Combined, they provide the Jewish people with a heritage, rich in meaning and symbolism. As we have seen, when we move to the New Testament, we encounter stepped-up parallelism, and the Jewish holidays in Leviticus 23 form the foundation for Christian traditions. The two are intimately linked.

Leviticus Outline

Part One: Sacrifice

- I. The Five Great Offerings (1:1-7:38)
 - A. Sweet-savor offerings (1:1- 3:17)
 - i. Burnt offering (1:3-17)
 - ii. Grain offering (2:1-16)
 - iii. Peace offering (3:1-17)
 - B. Non-sweet-savor offerings (4:1-6:7)
 - iv. Sin offering (4:1-5:13)
 - v. Guilt offering (5:14-5:26)
 - C. Regulations governing the offerings (6:1-7:38)
- II. The Priests (8:1-10:20)
 - A. Ordination of Aaron and his sons (8:1-9: 24)
 - B. Punishment for disobedience (10:1-20)

Part Two: Sanctification

- III. Holiness in Daily Life (11:1-22:33)
 - A. Food of God's people (11:1-47)
 - B. Children of God's people (12:1-8)
 - C. Cleansing of leprosy (13:1-14:57)
 - D. Cleansing of bodily emissions (15:1-32)
 - E. The Day of Atonement (16:1-34)
 - F. The sanctity of life (17:1-16)

- G. Applications of the laws (18:1-20:27)
 - i. Sexuality (18:1-30)
 - ii. Social relations (19:1-37)
 - iii. Penalty for breaking the commandments (20:1-27)
- H. Additional commands for priests (21:1-22:33)
- IV. Holy Days (23:1-44)
- V. Holiness in the Promised Land (24:1-26:46)
 - A. Lamp stand, showbread, death penalty for blasphemy (24:1-23)
 - B. Sabbatical year, year of jubilee, law of the kinsman redeemer (25:1-55)
 - C. Conditions of blessing in the land (26:1-46)
- VI. Laws Concerning Vows (27:1-34)

Leviticus

Syllabus

Week 1 (January 19, 20)

Lesson #1: “And he said . . .”

Leviticus sits squarely at the center of the Torah, the middle unit of God’s Law: **A** (Genesis); **B** (Exodus); **C** (Leviticus); **B’** (Numbers); **A’** (Deuteronomy). Sitting as it does between the brilliant narratives of Genesis and Exodus and the wilderness tales of Numbers and Deuteronomy, Leviticus seems a moment of stasis, a pause in Scripture’s forward movement that dwells on the mechanics of sacrifice and the minutiae of ritual law, subjects of little interest or relevance to a modern audience.

In truth, most readers either bog down in Leviticus, or simply skip over it.

But not us! If properly understood, Leviticus is a thrilling book, one that parts the paper-thin veil separating heaven and earth, revealing God’s plan of redemption in intimate detail and taking us into the innermost sanctuary of the living God.

Lesson #2: The 5 Great Sacrifices, Part 1: Sweet Savor Offerings (Leviticus 1: 1-3: 17)

Virtually all ancient religions practiced animal sacrifice as an integral part of their worship. The distinguished Assyriologist A. L. Oppenheim succinctly characterized such religions as “the care and feeding of the god.” The five great sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus 1: 1 – 5: 26—four of which are animal sacrifices—depart radically from this idea, however. As the psalmist says in Psalm 50: 9-13—

*I do not ask more bullocks from your farms
nor goats from among your herds.
For I own all the beasts of the forest,
beasts in their thousands on my hills.
I know all the birds in the sky;
all that moves in the field belongs to me
Were I hungry, I would not tell you,
for I own the world and all it holds.
Do you think I eat the flesh of bulls
or drink the blood of goats?*

Rather than “the care and feeding” of God, the five great sacrifices in Leviticus are symbolic acts that express a set of moral and ethical values, which in turn provide a mechanism for all Israelites, regardless of wealth or social status, to communicate directly with God and to participate in the spiritual life of the covenant community.

The early Church Fathers viewed the five great sacrifices in Leviticus through a Christian interpretive lens as foreshadowing the person and work of Christ. In his *Homilies on Leviticus* (Gary Wayne Barkley, trans. *The Fathers of the Church: a New Translation*, vol. 83, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), Origen stresses the 3-fold understanding of Leviticus: its literal, moral and spiritual layers. And in his *Summa Theologiae* (q. 102 a. 3 co.) St. Thomas Aquinas states succinctly:

The ceremonies of the Old Law had a two-fold cause, namely, a literal cause, according as they were intended for divine worship; and a figurative or mystical cause, according as they were intended to foreshadow Christ; and in either way the ceremonies pertaining to the sacrifices can be assigned to a fitting cause.

Read through such a Christian interpretive lens, the “sweet savor” offerings—the burnt offering, grain offering and peace offering—speak of the person of Christ, of his offering himself wholly and completely to God, of his perfect humanity and of his being our peace.

Assignment

Read: Read Leviticus 1: 1 – 3: 17.

Enrichment Material

Robert Alter, “Leviticus,” *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), pp. 539-672.

Lawrence Boadt, “The Book of Leviticus,” *Reading the Old Testament, an Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), pp. 158-159.

Lawrence Boadt, “The Pentateuch: Leviticus” *The Catholic Study Bible*, pp. 125-133.

Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus, a Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

Week 2 (January 26, 27)

Lesson #3: *The 5 Great Sacrifices, Part 2: Non-Sweet Savor Offerings* (Leviticus 4: 1-5: 26)

Unlike the “sweet savor” offerings of Leviticus 1: 1 – 3: 17 which are voluntary, the “non-sweet savor” offerings of 4: 1 – 5: 26 are mandatory—they expiate for moral or physical impurity, the breach of God’s Law. In the ecology of morality, an individual’s sins—even if they are inadvertent—adversely affect not just the person committing the sin, but all of one’s society and, indeed, the sanctuary itself: like a malignant cloud, sin pollutes and poisons the very dwelling place of God.

Jacob Milgrom poetically describes this phenomenon as “the priestly *Picture of Dorian Gray*,” recalling Oscar Wilde’s 1891 novel of the same name. In the novel when the virtuous Dorian is granted eternal life he embarks on a course of debauchery and licentiousness. Oddly, his depravity does not affect his stunning, youthful beauty; instead, his portrait—hidden away—becomes uglier and evermore grotesque. In the same way, sin may not blotch the face of the sinner, but it certainly blotches the face of the sanctuary.

According to Leviticus, if a person’s impurity is physical, only bathing is required to purify the body; if it is moral, a remorseful conscience clears the impurity. Consequently, the sin offering and the guilt offering do not focus on “purifying” the person making the offering; rather, the “non-sweet savor” offerings purify the sacred space of the sanctuary, which has been defiled by a person’s immoral or illicit behavior.

The “non-sweet savor” offerings are based on four principles:

- 1) Blood is the ritual cleanser that purges the sanctuary of impurities inflicted by the offender;
- 2) Sin committed anywhere generates impurity in the sanctuary in proportion to the magnitude of the sin committed;
- 3) God will not dwell in a polluted sanctuary; and
- 4) The community is collectively responsible for both individual and communal sin.

If the pollution of the sanctuary is not cleansed by shedding the blood of the “sin offering” and the “guilt offering,” God will abandon his sanctuary and his people will meet their deserved doom.

As we saw with the “sweet savor” offerings, viewing the “non-sweet savor” offerings through a Christian interpretive lens illuminates the work of Christ, his taking our sin on himself and by shedding his blood on the cross he “takes away” our sin, enabling us to stand before God, pure and righteous in God’s sight.

Lesson #4: The 5 Great Sacrifices, Redux (Leviticus 6: 1–7: 38)

Whereas Leviticus 1-5 addresses God’s covenant *people*, setting out a system of sacrificial observance, Leviticus 6-7 addresses God’s *priests*, delineating their role in the sacrificial system. For the ordinary Israelite the sacrifices are divided into those that are *voluntary* (the “sweet savor” offerings, chapters 1-3) and those that are *mandatory* (the “non-sweet savor” offerings, chapters 4-5), reflecting the ordinary person’s day-to-day interaction with the rituals. The sacrifices in chapters 1-3 are ordered from those that are most common in the eyes of ordinary people to those that are least common.

For the priests the sacrifices are divided between those that are *most holy* (the grain offering, sin offering and guilt offering) and those that are *holy* (the burnt offering and peace offering). The sacrifices in 6-7 are ordered according to those that are most important to the priests and to the performance of their duties.

Leviticus 6-7 can be divided into nine sections, each section beginning with “**The Lord [YHWH] spoke to Moses**” (6: 1, 12, 17; 7: 22, 28) or “**This is the teaching [torah]**” (6: 2, 7, 18; 7: 1, 11, 37). Twice, both phrases are used together (6: 1-2, 17-18). “Teaching” is the primary meaning of *torah*, although in the particular context of Leviticus 6-7 “ritual,” “procedure,” “regulation” or other synonyms may rightly be inferred. The repetitive use of *torah* throughout Leviticus emphasizes how Leviticus differs from Genesis/Exodus, Numbers/Deuteronomy in that Leviticus sits at the very heart of the Torah, and it is primarily a book of *teaching* or *instruction*. Indeed, one Hebrew name for Leviticus is *torah kohanim*, “Priestly Instruction,” and Jewish children from the Middle Ages onward have been introduced to the Torah not through the stories of Genesis/Exodus, Numbers/Deuteronomy, but through Leviticus, following the great rabbi Rashi’s injunction: “Let the pure ones come and study laws of purity.”

Assignment

Read: Read Leviticus 4: 1 – 7: 38.

Week 3 (February 2, 3)

Lesson #5: The Ordination of Aaron and His Sons (Leviticus 8: 1 – 9: 24)

As we discussed in Lesson #1 Scripture as a whole—and Leviticus in particular—portrays a tripartite cosmology which views the heavens above as the eternal realm of God, the earth beneath as the created realm of man, with a vast chasm of space—an “outer darkness”—separating the two. We saw this tripartite cosmology in the creation story of Genesis 1:

In the beginning, when God created the heavens [above] and the earth [below]—and the earth was without form or shape [a chaotic “welter” and “waste”] . . . then God said: Let there be light . . . God then separated the light from the darkness . . . Then God said: Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, to separate one body of water from the other. God made the dome, and it separated the water below the dome from the water above the dome . . .

In the creation story we have “the waters above” and “the waters below,” with a great “dome” separating the two. Such “division” lies at the heart of the creation story, and “division” dominates the conceptual world of Scripture: light/dark; day/night; upper water/lower water; dry land/seas; male/female; good/evil; life/death. As Robert Alter points out in his introduction to Leviticus in *The Five Books of Moses, a Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), p.541, the verb “divide” (Hebrew = *hivdil*) focuses the major themes of Leviticus. And with division comes a “gap” that must be bridged.

Early in our story bridging the gap was easy, for the gap was minimal: indeed, God stepped from his heaven and walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden, while Adam and Eve shared an intimate relationship with God, speaking with him “face to face.” Once sin entered the world, however, the gap became increasingly wide, a gaping chasm between God and man, with God remote in his heaven and man crawling the earth, far below. Recall in Genesis 11, the story of the Tower of Babel and how the people said to one another: “Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky,” and in response “The Lord *came down* to see the city and the tower that the people had built” (11: 4-5)!

Then in Exodus God “came down” once again on Mt. Sinai, and there he began building a bridge from heaven to earth, allowing man access to God, be it ever so tenuous. Mirroring the tripartite cosmology of *heaven/outer darkness/earth*, Mt. Sinai consisted of three sacred spaces: the wilderness at the foot of the mountain (where the people could assemble); the bottom third of the mountain (where only the priests could go); and the top of the mountain (where God dwelt in fire and smoke, and only Moses could go). In like fashion, when God gave Moses the blueprints for the Tabernacle, it too consisted of three sacred spaces: the courtyard, (where ordinary people could bring their sacrifices, accompanied by a priest); the Holy Place (the first chamber of the tent, where only a priest could enter as a representative of the people); and the Holy of Holies (where God dwelt, and only the High Priest could enter—once each year, on the Day of Atonement).

In the tripartite cosmology of Scripture, the priest serves as the “middle man” who can bridge the gap between heaven and earth, the representative who can approach God in his heaven and speak to God on behalf of the people.

Here in Lesson #5 we establish the levitical priesthood, with the ordination of Aaron and his sons.

Lesson #6: Nadab and Abihu, Toasted! (Leviticus 10: 1-20)

Approaching God as a representative of the people requires meticulous attention to form and ritual, following *exactly* the procedures that God has established. One does not enter God's sacred space lightly!

In Lesson #6 Nadab and Abihu do . . . and they suffer the dreadful consequences.

Assignment

Read: Leviticus 8: 1 – 10: 20.

Week 4 (February 9, 10)

Lesson #7: Excuse me, is this kosher? (Leviticus 11: 1-47)

Lessons 1-6 focused on **Leviticus, Part 1: Sacrifice**, the means by which a sinful people gain access to an infinitely holy God. With Lesson #7 we enter **Leviticus, Part 2: Sanctification**, the means by which a covenant people live an intimate relationship with God. Chapters 11: 1 – 22: 33 address “holiness” in daily life, covering such topics as: eating, giving birth, skin diseases, normal and abnormal bodily discharges, the sanctity of life and sexual relations: ordinary topics, to be sure, but why such a detailed, seemingly random catalogue of minor stuff? Why not eat pork? Or lobster? Or squid? Why is a woman “unclean” during her monthly menstrual cycle? A modern reader may well ask: “How can all of this possibly be relevant today?”

In Lesson #7 we begin our quest for holiness by examining *food*, as we seek the deeper meaning beneath the surface of our text, envisioning each law as a tiny tile in a much larger mosaic.

Lesson #8: “For unto you a child is born . . . (Leviticus 12: 1-8)

Few things are more basic to the human condition than food and sex. And with sex comes childbirth. As we discovered a deeper meaning in the dietary laws of chapter 11, so in chapter 12 shall we discover a deeper meaning in the birth of a child, as well as the relationship between a woman and her son or daughter.

Assignment

Read: Leviticus 12: 1-8; Luke 2: 1-40.

Week 5 (February 16, 17)

Lesson #9: Eeeew! What's that? Of scaly infections, mold and mildew (Leviticus 13: 1 - 14: 57)

As we enter Leviticus 13-14 we encounter detailed instructions concerning a condition that Scripture terms *sara'at*, a Hebrew word often translated “leprosy.” To be sure, *sara'at* is a much broader term than “leprosy,” or modern-day Hansen’s disease; in Scripture it is a condition that infects people, clothing and even houses in the form of “mold” or “mildew,” and it manifests itself as “scales”; hence, our *Catholic Study Bible* translates *sara'at* as “scaly infection.” Ask a modern-day dermatologist what *sara'at* is, based upon Leviticus 13-14, and he or she will say, “I don’t know,” for *sara'at* does not describe any known medical condition, either today or in the ancient past.

And that’s a clue for a proper reading of Leviticus 13-14. As Jacob Milgrom observes in his commentary on Leviticus:

The enigma of [sara'at] cannot be resolved by medical science, but it can, at least, be illumined once the medical approach is abandoned and attention is directed to the text itself. [In Leviticus] we are dealing with ritual, not medicine. Moreover, the text stresses that it is not the disease per se but its appearance that is the source of impurity.

Following this line of thinking, *sara'at* becomes a symbol or emblem of sin and death: 1) it becomes overt in loathsome ways; 2) it starts small, as “a swelling or rash or a bright spot”; 3) it advances surely and steadily; 4) it separates us from the community and from God; and 5) if not dealt with it is terminal. In this sense, *sara'at* is a progressive condition, a movement away from life toward death.

Understanding *sara'at* in this way opens the door to a much deeper understanding of the “scaly infections” in Leviticus 13-14, as well as to the normal and abnormal loss of semen and menstrual blood in Leviticus 15, our next lesson.

Lesson #10: Echoes of Onan (Leviticus 15: 1-33)

Leviticus 15 takes us into the arena of normal and abnormal bodily discharges among men and women, a topic that baffles many readers! Why would a woman be “unclean” during her menstrual cycle? Why would a man with a “genital discharge” be “unclean?” And why would any article that touches such a person (bedding, clothing, dishes . . .) also be “unclean?”

In short, why this obsession with bodily fluids?

In Lesson #10 we find out!

Assignment

Read: Leviticus 13: 1 – 15: 33.

Week 6 (February 23, 24)

Lesson #11: The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16: 1-34)

All year long Israel's sins have been polluting the sanctuary. Although individuals have brought purification offerings (sin offerings and guilt offerings) to cleanse the sanctuary, their offerings have had no effect on the actions of the brazen sinner who has refused to repent; his or her sins continue to pollute the sanctuary, posing the threat that God will abandon his dwelling place, leaving the people to fend for themselves. Thus, we have the annual Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies, purifying it with a sin offering—the blood of a goat—then transferring the pollution and the sins of the people onto the head of a second “scapegoat,” dispatching it into the wilderness, bearing the sins of *all* the people.

Yom Kippur is the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, the day when the slate is wiped clean and the people have a fresh start with God.

The Christian parallels are obvious:

- 1) as the blood of the goat makes atonement for the sins of the people, so the blood of Christ makes atonement for those who believe in him;
- 2) as the “scapegoat” bears the sins of the people, so does Christ bear our sins. As Isaiah wrote:

*Yet it was our pain that he bore,
our sufferings he endured.
We thought of him as stricken,
struck down by God and afflicted,
But he was pierced for our sins,
crushed for our iniquity.
He bore the punishment that makes us whole,
by his wounds we are healed.
We had all gone astray like sheep,
all following our own way;
But the Lord laid upon him
the guilt of us all.*

(53: 4-6)

- 3) as the Israelites start anew after the “Day of Atonement,” so do we start anew as a “saved” person, washed clean by the blood of Christ.

Lesson #12: The Scapegoat (Leviticus 16: 1-34)

The concept of the “scapegoat” has a long history in the religions of the world and in cultural anthropology. Sir James Frazer’s monumental 12-volume work, *The Golden Bough, a Study of Comparative Religion* (3rd edition, 1906-1915) devotes all of Volume 9 to “The Scapegoat,” a companion to Volume 4, “The Dying God.”

In Lesson #12 we examine the “scapegoat” in detail.

Assignment

Read: Leviticus 16: 1-34.

Week 7 (March 2, 3)

Lesson #13: “The life of all flesh is its blood” (Leviticus 17: 1-16)

If we hover above the Tabernacle and watch its operations—the Burnt Offering, Grain Offering, Peace Offering, Sin Offering and Guilt Offering—we may well be repulsed by the oceans of blood shed by an endless stream of bulls, lambs and goats. Indeed, in Hebrews 9: 22 we read: “According to the law almost everything is purified by blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” We might also recall the meticulous attention given to menstrual blood, both normal and abnormal, in Leviticus 15; to the waters of the Nile River being turned to blood in Exodus 7; and to St. Peter’s statement that we are ransomed “with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1: 18). Indeed, blood runs through Scripture like a bright crimson thread, a major leitmotif in God’s plan of redemption.

In Lesson #13 we explore the profound meaning of blood in our story.

Lesson #14: Everything You Wanted to Know about Sex (but were afraid to ask!) (Leviticus 18: 1 - 20: 27)

In Leviticus 11: 14 God says: “Be holy, because I am holy,” and in Leviticus 18-20 we learn that being holy has a lot to do with who we have sex with . . . and who we don’t.

In Lesson #14 we take an adventurous stroll through a sexual hall of mirrors.

Assignment

Read: Leviticus 18: 1 - 20: 27.

Week 8 (March 9, 10)

Lesson #15: Of Priestly Perfection (Leviticus 21: 1 – 22: 33)

In our study of Leviticus 6-7 we examined the role of the priest as the “middle man” between the people and God, the one who stands in the gap of the tripartite cosmology of Scripture, presiding over the five great sacrifices. In Leviticus 8-9 we witnessed the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests, and in Leviticus 10 we saw the punishment of Nadab and Abihu when they appeared before God, unbidden and unrepentant. Now, in Leviticus 21-22 we learn of the high moral expectations God expects of his priests.

Lesson #16: Sacred Time, Part 1 (Leviticus 23: 1- 24: 23)

With the building of the Tabernacle in the second half of Exodus we learned of “sacred space,” space that mirrors the tripartite structure of Scriptural cosmology. In Lesson #16 we examine “sacred time.”

We first encounter “sacred time” in the first creation story, Genesis 1: 1 – 2: 3. In a beautiful example of carefully structured mythopoeic literature, God creates the heavens and the earth in six days, resting on the seventh:

Thus the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed. On the seventh day God completed the work he had been doing; he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation.

(Genesis 2: 1-3)

Now, in Lesson #16 we learn that “sacred time” punctuates the year, giving it a rhythm that mirrors the natural agrarian cycle of planting, growing, harvest and fallow, as well as God’s intervention into human history for his covenant people. The Jewish calendar incorporates seven major periods of “sacred time,” or holidays (e.g., “holy-days”):

1. **Passover (Leviticus 23: 5)**
2. **Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23: 6)**
3. **First Fruits (Leviticus 23: 11)**
4. **Pentecost (Leviticus 23: 16)**
5. **Trumpets (Leviticus 23: 24)**
6. **Atonement (Leviticus 23: 27)**
7. **Tabernacles (Leviticus 23: 34)**

In like fashion, Christianity also observes seven “sacred times” throughout the liturgical year:



Assignment

Read: Leviticus 23: 1- 24: 23.

Week 9 (March 16, 17)

Lesson #17: Sacred Time, Part 2 (Leviticus 25: 1-55)

As Leviticus 23-24 structures “sacred time” throughout the year, Leviticus 25 extends “sacred time” to every seven years (the Sabbatical Year) and every “seven times seven” years (the Jubilee Year). Every seventh year the land is to lie fallow, allowing it to “rest,” and every “seven times seven” years, on the following year (the 50th, the Jubilee Year) all property shall be returned to its original owners, regardless of debt, thus ensuring that poverty (and wealth) shall not be systemic: each generation will have the slate wiped clean and given a fresh start.

Lesson #18: Rewards and Punishments (Leviticus 26: 1-46)

When we studied the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12, we learned that a “covenant” is a binding legal agreement between two parties, and that a covenant involves *privileges* and *obligations* on the part of both parties, which must be taken seriously. When God reaffirms his covenant with the entire Israelite community at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19, those privileges and obligations are implicit.

God’s covenant with Israel is **unconditional**. In Exodus 4: 22 God says, “Israel is my son, my firstborn.” And St. Paul affirms in Romans 11: 26, 29 that “all Israel will be saved . . . for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.” Israel’s *position* as God’s “son,” his “firstborn” is eternal. But enjoying the *prerogatives* of that position is **conditional**, based upon obedience to God’s law.

In Leviticus 26 God enumerates the rewards for obedience and the punishments for disobedience, a list that is expanded and made more graphic in Deuteronomy 28.

Assignment

Read: Leviticus 26: 1-46.

Week 10 (March 23, 24)

Lesson #19: *Of Vows and Promises* (Leviticus 27: 1-34)

In Scripture God makes many promises to humanity as a whole, as well as to individual people. In the Abrahamic Covenant, God promises Abraham:

*I will make of you a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you
and curse those who curse you.
All families of the earth
will find blessing in you.*

(Genesis 12: 2-3)

In the Davidic Covenant, God promises David:

I declare to you that the Lord will build you a house: when your days have been completed and you must join your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you who will be one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He it is who shall build me a house, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me, and I will not withdraw my favor from him as I withdrew it from the one who was before you [King Saul]; I will maintain him in my house and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be firmly established forever.

(1 Chronicles 17: 10-14)

And God promises each of us:

[That he] so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

(John 3: 16)

Notice that all three of these promises are ***unconditional***. Not one depends upon Abraham, David or us doing anything for God; only God doing for us.

Yet nowhere in Scripture does God ask *us* to make *him* a promise (perhaps because he knows that we break them)! But if we choose to make God a promise, he expects us to keep it: Leviticus 27 makes this quite clear.

Lesson #20: Coda

Christians often view Leviticus as an impenetrable tangle of ancient laws and rituals, things entirely superseded by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the inauguration of the New Covenant.

Nothing could be farther from the truth! For Jews, Leviticus sits at the very heart of the Torah: from God's lips, to Moses, to you. As we noted in Lesson #1, from the Middle Ages onward, Jewish children are introduced to Scripture, not with the great stories of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers or Deuteronomy, but through study of Leviticus, following the great rabbi Rashi's slogan, "Let the pure ones come and study laws of purity."

For a Christian, studying Leviticus and penetrating to the deeper levels of the anagogic (future events of Christian history), typological (how events in the Hebrew Scriptures foreshadow those in the New Testament) and tropological (the "moral" meaning of the stories and how they are applied to us today), gives us the clearest picture we have of God's plan of redemption and of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this concluding lesson we review and summarize what we have learned from Leviticus [the Hebrew title is *Vayikra*, "... and he called"], the only book of Scripture that is spoken primarily in 1st person God.

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