

# Leviticus 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ]    Leviticus chapter 1 And it shall be accepted for him, to make atonement for him.

Then he shall kill the bull before the Lord, and Aaron's sons the priest shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire.

And Aaron's sons the priest shall arrange the pieces, the head and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar. But its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water, and the priest shall burn all of it on the altar as a burnt offering, a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

If his gift for a burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or goats, he shall bring a male without blemish, and he shall kill it on the north side of the altar before the Lord. And Aaron's sons the priest shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar.

And he shall cut it into pieces, with its head and its fat, and the priest shall arrange them on the wood that is on the fire on the altar. But the entrails and the legs he shall wash with water, and the priest shall offer all of it, and burn it on the altar.

[ 1 : 42 ]    It is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. If his offering to the Lord is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering of turtle doves or pigeons.

And the priest shall bring it to the altar, and wring off its head, and burn it on the altar. Its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. He shall remove its crop with its contents, and cast it beside the altar on the east side, in the place for ashes.

He shall tear it open by its wings, but shall not sever it completely. And the priest shall burn it on the altar, on the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

The book of Leviticus is one of the hardest books in the Bible. It's the point where many Bible reading plans fail. My first two attempts to read through the Bible in a year founded on the rocks of the opening chapters of Leviticus.

If the instructions for building the tabernacle and the description of its construction was tedious, at least it wasn't anywhere near as strange and foreign as the book of Leviticus. The sacrificial system is connected to the tabernacle.

[ 2 : 47 ]    The tabernacle, however, is typically spoken of in Leviticus as the tent of meeting. It's the place where God encounters his people. And the point of the sacrificial system is to facilitate and to make possible that proper encounter.

And the sacrificial system is very much a meaningful system of particulars. It's like a language. We can often think about the meaning of language in terms of the relationship between a word and the external object in the world that it refers to.

But the meaning of terms can also be discovered through the internal relationships of a language. And the way that terms, even when referring to the same object in the world, can carry very different shades of meaning and present things within very different contexts.

So if we're talking about a dog, for instance, you can talk about that dog as a pet. It's a very different thing from talking about the dog as a canine or as a hound or a pooch or a doggo.

These are all different terms that carry different connotations and frame that single object in the world in different ways. Now, when we think about language, language works in terms of such a system.

[ 3 : 56 ] And the sacrificial system is also a system. It's a number of different practices that are understood not just with their relationship to something outside of themselves. Maybe they point to Christ, for instance.

They are also to be understood in terms of their differences from one another, by the way that they are associated with, differentiated from, juxtaposed with, or homologous with other realities or practices or persons within the system.

For instance, we can see an association between the legitimate sacrifice and the legitimate priest. Human life, society and relation is mapped onto and symbolically enacted within a system of animals, architecture, furniture, agricultural seasons and ritual.

And the animals, the architecture, the furniture, the agricultural feasts and the rituals, they're not magic. As the book of Hebrews argues, the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin. The tabernacle was always patterned after and a copy of a greater realm of the Lord's presence and was never the true archetype.

It was rather a sort of extended and enacted metaphorical system, a sort of mirror within and through which Israel could comport itself to the reality. Now we tend to think about things in terms of abstract and disembodied concepts.

[ 5 : 13 ] We can be tempted to think of the tabernacle and the sacrificial system as pictures, particularly of Christ. The point of it all, we suppose, is to reflect upon the pictures and to see what ideas they are teaching.

And then we try and translate the pictures into ideas and that's what we're supposed to derive from it. Now such an approach is not altogether without some truth to it, but is extremely misleading.

The tabernacle and the rites of the sacrificial system were designed to be inhabited as reality-filled, symbolic objects and practices. They weren't primarily designed to be looked at from without and translated into abstract ideas.

The tabernacle is a symbolic building, but God is really present there and the structure of the building and its associated rituals provide frameworks within which the reality of people's relationship to God could be lived out.

To some extent, we could maybe compare this to a coronation or a wedding ceremony. The ceremony has all sorts of ritual and symbolic elements. And those symbolic elements are not just pictures that we reflect upon from without.

[ 6 : 16 ] They're not just fripperies that are there to be decorative. They're the means by which we enter into the reality. The exchange of rings, for instance, is not just a picture to be thought about.

It is actually a symbolic rite that is part of affecting the reality of a marriage. If you were to strip away all the symbolic elements of a wedding ceremony and translate it fully into the realm of ideas and rational commitments, it would be a lot less effective as a marriage.

The actual symbolic processes are means by which we navigate the reality and enter into that reality. If a coronation was stripped of all its pomp, if there were no crown put on someone's head, it would not be so effective as a coronation.

Entering into the reality requires a lot of this symbolism. All of the attention to the dress and the ceremony and the different parts of the rituals are integral to the effectiveness of these rituals.

Of course, if you stand back and look at it in a very abstract way, it seems strange to represent the sovereignty over a nation in a piece of jewelled metal put upon someone's head. But in the practical context of the coronation ceremony, it really makes a difference.

[ 7 : 28 ] So the sacrificial system is not about the communication of abstract ideas in pictures, which if we just grasped them directly would make the ritual irrelevant. No, the drama of the ritual is integral to what makes it work.

But the ritual isn't automatic and purely objective, as if, for instance, the exchange of rings has some weird magical character to bind people together in blissful matrimony.

That's not how it works. The symbols and the rituals must be inhabited by those who perform them. The tabernacle, for instance, isn't a talisman, and the sacrifices don't substitute for hearts far from God.

However, properly inhabited, the sacrifices and the tabernacle comport people and genuinely relate people to God in an appropriate way. It's giving the reality through the symbol.

The whole sacrificial system, then, is an extended system of metaphor, a poetic mapping of Israel's life onto the animal and vegetable reality of creation.

[ 8 : 28 ] It's ordered around an architectural symbol that is a macrocosm of the human body and a microcosm of society, the creation, and the wider cosmos. Israel was to understand and to articulate its existence and its fellowship with God in terms of this profoundly material and particular reality.

And the created cosmos was not for them merely a site for the operation of abstract mathematical laws upon generic particles. It wasn't just a reservoir of raw material to be extracted and pressed into the service of humanity's power, nor was it just a realm of beautiful surface spectacles to gaze upon.

It was a charged realm of meaning and communion where the particular objects of the world bore divine truth. And such a system of analogies places the particular and its realm of differences into sharp relief.

The animals of the sacrificial system and the dietary laws, for instance, present Israel with a system by which to understand and be formed into its unique place within the world.

Clean and unclean, sacrificial and non-sacrificial animals, and the many other distinctions within each category are metaphorical frameworks for thought. They're a concrete framework designed to teach the art of discrimination in the realm of the particular that could not contrast more with our very abstract systems of thought.

[ 9 : 52 ] The people relate to God through specific and symbolic sacrificial practices in which the restoration of their relationship with and their new comportment of themselves towards God is symbolically enacted by them in the sacrificial rites.

Now, within this sort of framework, within this way of viewing the world, particular differences assume great salience. Male and female, Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised, priest, ruler, people, firstborn and later born, cooked and raw, seed time and harvest, boiled and roasted, within the camp, without the camp, clean and unclean, feast, fast, ordinary time, morning, evening, etc.

All of these differences are highlighted through metaphorical and poetic frameworks of thought and practice that are designed both to bear considerable weight and to have authoritative and theological force.

To sacrifice a donkey, for instance, rather than a bull for the priest, would be a violation of truth. It wouldn't just be the breaking of an arbitrary ritual command. It would be misrepresenting the place of the priest within the system.

Now this may seem all very primitive to us, but within this framework, Israel had a far more sophisticated practical framework for grasping its relationship to God than we generally do with our abstract theological concepts.

[ 11 : 15 ] The power of the sacrificial system is that as animals represented Israel and its various members, by performing sacrifice through symbolic substitutes, Israel could represent its own proper approach to God.

However, the sacrifices also highlighted that something was lacking, as the animals substituted for human beings at the crucial point. So human beings weren't actually sacrificing themselves to God.

They were giving animal substitutes instead of sacrificing themselves. But the suggestion being that there's something lacking. There is some need for the human being to offer himself to God, and something needs to provide for that.

The animal can represent it, but it can't actually fulfill the reality of it. Something is still missing. And the point of the rituals was always primarily as things to be performed, not primarily to be fodder for theologising.

Although we do have this extensive description of the sacrifices, a description of the sacrifices that is addressed to the whole people. It's not just a book of ritual for priests that they're supposed to reflect upon by themselves.

[ 12 : 19 ] It's something that's given to the nation as a whole. And the whole people would have to learn the meaning of these sacrifices as they watched them being performed, as they inhabited the practices, and then as they stood back and reflected upon their practice.

The theology lies beneath the surface of the ritual texts, implicit in the logic of their performance, which tends to surface through close attention to their place in the system as it emerges through comparative study of many texts.

But as you practice these things on a regular basis over many years, you would get a sense of what was meant. You would have a feel for what it meant to approach to God.

And this would be a knowledge, a tacit, implicit knowledge, that would be enjoyed by Israelites more generally, not just by the gifted theologians among the scribes and the priests.

The sacrifices tend to be conjugations of a root meaning. And if you look through the sacrifices, you'll see they're very similar in their form. And it can be difficult to understand what makes them about one thing rather than another.

[ 13 : 22 ] Some emphasize the ascension of the offering on the altar. Some emphasize the blood rites. Some emphasize the meal aspect, etc. And we're supposed to see them within the system, comparing them with each other and their slight differences, that they're conjugating a root meaning, but also in that conjugation they're set over against each other.

So we need to ask questions like, what type of animal is offered? What is the species of the animal? What is the sex of the animal? What actions shall be performed upon the animal before it is killed?

Where is the animal killed? How is the animal divided? How are the parts arranged and prepared? Where does the blood go? What parts of the offering are eaten? Who eats the offering?

What parts are disposed of in some other manner? What is the effect of the offering? Going through Leviticus chapter 1, we notice many of these sorts of details. For instance, we're told that the bull that has to be offered has to be a male without defects.

Defects can disqualify a sacrifice. They can also disqualify a priest. And there's a ritual here with a moral connotation. We see the connection between some of these things in Leviticus chapter 21 and 22.

[ 14 : 32 ] There's an analogy drawn between the external lack of blemish in an animal and the lack of moral fault in a person. In this chapter, we also see a list of different animals to be sacrificed.

Bull, goat, sheep, pigeon and turtle dove. These are the core animals of the sacrificial system. And different animals represent different parts of the people.

This becomes apparent as we go through the book of Leviticus. It's not yet clear here. The burnt offering, as we see in Exodus chapter 29, verses 38 to 43, is the core daily sacrifice.

There's a morning and an evening burnt offering. And there is a collective and an individual character to Israel's worship. So there is this common practice of worship every single day at the tabernacle.

And then there are also these festal occasions when people would all gather together and have an event for the people more generally. And then there are times when an individual worshipper will offer something themselves as an individual or for their family, perhaps.

[ 15 : 32 ] The sex of the animals isn't arbitrary. It's part of a system of meaning. The burnt offering of the herd or the flock has to be a male without blemish. Some sacrifices, however, could be female.

For instance, the peace offering in Leviticus chapter 3, verse 1 could be female. The sin or purification offering for the commoner described in Leviticus chapter 4, verse 28 and 32 had to be a female goat or lamb.

So this helps us to see that there is some sort of logic underlying this. The fact that the primary sacrifices had to be male, but that not all of the sacrifices were male, and that in the case of certain sacrifices it was stipulated that they should be female, it raises problems for almost all of the typical explanations.

If male animals were simply more expendable, then we would expect the greatest sacrifices to be female. But that's not what we find. If the sacrifices had to be male simply in order to symbolise Christ as a male, we wouldn't have female sacrifices.

If the sex were a matter of indifference, the sex of sacrifices wouldn't be stipulated at all. If the point was that male sacrifices were to be offered on the basis of some natural superiority of the male sex, then we wouldn't have female sacrifices required at certain points.

[ 16 : 47 ] Something more seems to be going on. If we go back to Genesis chapter 15, I think we see a further part of the background here. In Genesis chapter 15, again, we see the sex is stipulated, but it helps us to understand what's taking place in Leviticus chapter 1.

In Genesis 15, God tells Abraham to gather animals together for a covenant ceremony. God is making a covenant with Abraham, cutting a covenant with him, and this covenant ceremony is at the very core of it.

He said to him, Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle dove, and a young pigeon. These are all the animals of the sacrificial system.

And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when the birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abraham drove them away.

And then later on, When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between those pieces. On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying, To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt, the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

[ 18 : 07 ] So it's the covenant ceremony, and there's the same five animals divided in the same sort of way. So when we get to Leviticus chapter 1, we see, for instance, that the animals are divided between the priest, who represents the Lord, and the worshipper, and they have to take care of different halves of the animal.

And then, in the case of the turtle doves and the pigeons, he must wring off its head, and burn it on the altar, its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar, he shall remove its crop with its contents, and cast it besides the altar on the east side, in place for ashes.

He shall tear it open by its wings, but shall not sever it completely. It's the same description as we have back in Genesis 15. There is a connection between these things. Every time the sacrifices were performed, it harks back to that original covenant-making ceremony.

It's a recalling of God's statement to his people. God established this sacrificial movement, and every single sacrifice is based upon that root meaning. It's a development out from that.

It's also a re-enactment of Passover. If you think about the initial covenant that God established with Israel through the Exodus, it involved a sort of sacrifice. It involved the sacrifice of the firstborn sons.

[ 19 : 22 ] And the worshipper brings the animal to the door of the tabernacle, places his hand upon the head of the animal. It's designated as his representative, his substitute.

And this corresponds to the whole setting up of the Passover lamb, which is related, of course, to the child, the son. These are sons of the herd, or sons of the flock, that are brought forward.

The worshipper slays the animal. It's connected with the Passover lamb being killed. The priest splashes the blood on the altar as the blood is put on the doors of the house. And the priest stokes up the fire on the altar.

The altar is a sort of Sinai. We've seen the connection between the mountain and the altar. And the worshipper will wash parts of the animal. This is Israel's passage through the water to God's presence.

Those parts that are washed are placed onto the altar fire, and it turns it to smoke. And this corresponds to the ascent upon the mountain. And whenever any sacrifice was being offered then, it was a replaying of the history of the Exodus and the making of the covenant at Sinai.

[ 20 : 29 ] It was also looking back to God's forming of the covenant with Abraham at the very beginning. And in the deep background, there's something more. Eden. It's the return to the sanctuary, to fellowship with God, that place that people have been cut off from.

The word for the person who brings forward the sacrifice at the beginning of this chapter is Adam. When an Adam brings an offering to the Lord, it's a return to the realm of God's presence.

It's drawing our minds back perhaps to Cain and Abel. This is the proper sort of approach to God. It overcomes the anxiety that your sacrifice might not be accepted. If you approach in this proper manner, you will be accepted.

God will invite you into his presence. The Lord called Moses and spoke to him. That's the sentence that introduces this chapter. It's the introduction to the speeches more generally, that expression.

The Lord spoke to Moses saying is repeated on several occasions throughout this book. 37 occasions, I think, actually. Chapter 1 to 3 is a single speech, all held by this initial introduction.

[ 21 : 30 ] And there is some difference on this particular occasion because the Lord calls first and then speaks. We might think about the events of the burning bush in Exodus chapter 3 verse 4 and Sinai also in chapter 19 verse 3.

As we go through Leviticus, it will also become apparent that this is occurring before the events of Exodus chapter 40. The tabernacle has not yet been fully set up. So this is happening within the tent of meeting, which is mentioned in chapter 33.

The tent of meeting, which is set outside of the camp where God speaks to Moses. The ascension offering seems to be the sacrifice par excellence, which is why it's mentioned first of all, why it's the one at the very heart and beginning of the book of Leviticus.

It involves bulls from the herd or sheep or goats from the flock or turtles and pigeons as birds. These animals are the set of the animals of the sacrificial system, representing Israel as a nation and all its different members.

So the bull represents the whole congregation or represents the high priest. The goat represents the leader of the people, the male goat. The sheep can represent the common person of the flock.

[ 22 : 38 ] The turtle doves and the pigeons can represent the poor among the people. And so the whole nation is represented through this set of animals in its distinctive parts. This chapter introduces us to some of the fundamental elements of sacrifices that will be developed in different ways in the chapters that follow.

For specific sacrifices that emphasize a particular element of the sacrificial rite for a particular purpose. So if you're dealing with expiation or purification, the blood is particularly important, the blood rite part of it.

If it's the peace offering, it's the meal part of it that's particularly important. And these fundamental sacrifices can be joined together in particular ways for larger ceremonies, such as the Day of Atonement.

We also can see deviations from the fundamental template in specific cases. We should be especially attentive on such occasions, as those sorts of deviations are meaningful and can also serve to illuminate the underlying logic.

When we think about sacrifice as Christians, our temptation is to think about it narrowly in terms of death. Whereas in many cases, the death of the animal is not actually that prominent within the rite.

[ 23 : 46 ] It's something of secondary importance. In the case of the whole burnt offering, the death is given a bit more significance. There's the hand placed upon the head of the animal.

It's killed in a specific place, which is where the most holy sacrifices had to be killed more generally. And sacrifices that had to be killed in this particular place before the Lord could often be associated with the burnt offering.

They're sacrificed there because it is most holy like the burnt offering. The point of the sacrifice, however, has a lot more to do in many cases with where the blood is put. It's the expiation or the purification that's involved.

Or maybe it's the case that it's a meal that's supposed to be shared. And so it's the eater that's particularly important. Who is going to eat this and where are they going to eat it? Once we've moved beyond a narrow fixation upon the death of the animal as a substitutionary atonement or something like that, we'll begin to see that a lot more things are comprehended within the sacrificial system than we might initially have supposed.

So the whole ascension offering is the lifting up of this animal to God's presence, the ascension of that animal as a representative of the worshipper into God's presence. So it's not just about the death, it's about the rising up into God's presence in the smoke.

[ 25 : 00 ] The tribute offering is something that is given as an offering or gift to the Lord. The peace offering is something that is eaten with the Lord, a fellowship of communion. And the purification offering is dealing with sin through blood, it's purifying things, expiating.

The trespass offering is a sort of repayment of God, it's restitution for something that has been taken from God. As the logic of the sacrificial system starts to come together then, we'll see it's a vast and beautiful and very subtle and nuanced system that helps us to understand what it means to approach God.

It's one of the reasons why we should spend time in the book of Leviticus. There is much to reward us here, much to enlighten us, much to help us to understand what Christian worship means, what the work of Christ means, not just in the event of his death, but also in his resurrection and ascension, also in his work in the Holy of Holies in the heavenly temple and how his blood avails for us in that realm.

A question to consider, comparing the description of the whole burnt offering or the ascension offering within this chapter with the chapters that follow and the sacrifices within them, what are some of the most notable similarities and also variations between the sacrifices that share this fundamental template.