



INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

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One of the keys to understanding the Book of Leviticus is Genesis 1, the account of the creation of the world.

The world that God creates comes into being through a series of separations: between light and darkness, between the waters above and below the firmament, between the sea and the dry land. In the end there are three major divisions, the heavens, the earth and the waters beneath the earth, each with its own distinctive features and inhabitants. As the Psalmist explains, the heavens are the domain of God, but the earth has been given to human beings to inhabit. However, because of God's experience with human beings there will be one further act of separation, the choosing of Israel from amongst all the peoples of the world to be a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. The Book of Leviticus is about how the collective life of Israel is to be regulated so as to fulfil this task as a kingdom of priests. A key term is '*kadosh*', 'separate', 'distinctive', and in this particular context, 'set apart' for God. And being set apart for God, one has to exist within certain boundaries and divisions that should not be crossed. Effectively Israel is to align oneself with the pattern laid down by God for creation. This translates into the language of 'clean' and 'unclean'. The food you eat must conform to certain categories. The animals you eat should be herbivores and neither hunt nor scavenge. Animals that live between two domains, between sea and land, like shellfish, or between land and sky, are explicitly forbidden – they cross boundaries. Clothing made from different kinds of materials should not be worn. Different kinds of animals should not be mated together. Certain physical or pathological states of the body make one temporarily 'out of alignment' with the normal, and this state must be remedied. Certain human relationships are seen as conforming to an acceptable pattern and others not. Even time must be contained within a divine pattern of weekdays and Shabbat, and a festival calendar governing the entire year. Moreover the behaviour amongst the 'kingdom of priests' must be correct. Yet inevitably things go wrong. Mistakes are made, boundaries are crossed, human realities, rivalries and needs, constantly threaten to destroy the idealised pattern of existence. So an elaborate system is needed to constantly monitor and correct these lapses. The legal system is to ensure that wrongdoing is dealt with, punishment is meted out and the correct human relationships are re-established. But the sacrificial cult fulfils the role of restoring the relationship with God which has been damaged by these activities. The blood of the sacrifice formally washes away the 'uncleanness', in the immediate situation and once a year on Yom Kippur for the priesthood and the people as a whole.

It is a remarkably coherent and comprehensive system. It assumes that God is a desired presence in their midst, but also a dangerous and barely containable force. It requires an entire population to understand their responsibilities and a priestly hierarchy able to service the system, but with safeguards also to prevent the abuse of their power. As a system it served effectively for more than a thousand years.

But there is also another possible perspective. The first word of the Book of Leviticus is *'vayikra'*, literally, 'He called'. But if you look at the Masoretic text you will see an anomaly. The last letter of the word *'vayikra'*, the *'alef'*, is written small and raised above the line. It looks as though it was squeezed in as an afterthought. Without it we would read the word *'vayikar'*, 'it happened'. This led to a midrash. Moses was a very modest man and was embarrassed to write that God specifically called to him, so instead wrote *'vayikar'*, as if God simply happened to come across him. But God insisted that he add the *alef* – he was really called by God! The two verbs, though pronounced the same, *'kara'*, have diametrically opposite meanings: one is about a calling, a vocation, the other is about chance. And therein lies the problematic of the Book of Leviticus. For the entire system is about eliminating 'chance', of ensuring a rigorous control over every aspect of life, and over everything that happens, within an isolated and hermetically sealed environment. It includes no real relationship with other peoples around, no political dimension, leaving that up to God as the guarantor of their safety. It may be true to the designation, 'holy nation', but takes no account of the responsibility as a 'kingdom of priests', for just as priests mediate between the people and God, so a 'kingdom of priests' bear the same responsibility to the other kingdoms of the earth. It is other strands of Biblical thought that address these wider issues.

We will be entering this week a remarkable world, far more complex than this superficial introduction suggests. Though it requires a leap of imagination to enter, nevertheless it poses real questions about how a religious society and community should operate; how people should interact with one another, and how, as individuals and collectively, to mediate the encounter with God.