



THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS – AN IMPORTANT BOOK IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

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1. Differing relevance in Judaism and Christianity

We can characterize the different degrees of importance given to the Book of Leviticus in Judaism and Christianity with the words of G.J. Wenham:

“Leviticus used to be the first book that Jewish children studied in the synagogue. In the modern Church it tends to be the last part of the Bible anyone looks at seriously.”¹

In the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*², J. Milgrom also highlights the great significance of the Book of Leviticus as the first object of instruction in school, which *Midrash LevR VII.3* explains as follows:

“Rabbi Assi: Why do the small children begin (to learn) with Leviticus (Torah Kohanim) and not with Genesis? Because the small children are pure and the sacrifices are pure; so the pure come and occupy themselves with the pure.”

In addition, Milgrom draws attention to two further facts, which underline Judaism’s particular esteem for this book:

“The impact of Leviticus upon Judaism can be comprehended by realizing that nearly half (247) of the 613 commandments (GenR. 3:5) and about the same proportion of the material of the Talmud are based upon Leviticus ... The priority of Leviticus in the life of rabbinic Judaism is also attested by the title of its tannaitic commentary Sifra, ‘The Book’ as against Sifrei (on Numbers and Deuteronomy), i.e. ‘Other Books.’”³

Anyone who wants to understand rabbinic or (religious) Judaism at all, must understand the biblical Book of Leviticus and the traditions to which it gave rise. Precisely this book is the foundation of Judaism as a way of life – and that in contrast to Christianity, which usually presents itself primarily as a system of dogmas (which in my opinion is not according to the Bible).

Even though Christianity and in particular its Catholic expression finds great inspiration in the Book of Leviticus (e.g. the Christology in the Letter to the Hebrews, atonement-soteriology, the priestly rites and structures of the Church, the distinction between pure and impure, the traditions of the Jubilee Year, etc.), the book is marginalized in Christianity and to a large extent ignored. The classic proof of this is e.g. M. Noth’s commentary on Leviticus in the series *Altes Testament Deutsch* [The Old Testament in German], where it is said in the preface:

¹ G.J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT 3), Grand Rapids/MI 1979, VII.

² *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Volume 11, Jerusalem 1971, 138–147.

³ *Ibid.* 138f.

“The book is one of those books of the Old Testament that are usually not read much. Understandably; for it is predominantly concerned with cultic matters and that in a way that seems quite monotonous. But if one looks more closely, something of the living diversity and historical development of the essence of the religious rites in ancient Israel can be seen precisely in this book; and in ancient Israel, the cultic religious service was one of life’s central elements.”⁴

In dealing with the Book of Leviticus, what is to be said about the Christian / ecclesial way of looking at the Hebrew Bible / the First Testament as a whole becomes particularly clear: On the one hand, we can see the selective process. People like to quote individual passages as “peak texts”, as e.g. the commandment to love one’s neighbour and the foreigner in Lev 19:18.34 and the prohibition to exploit as well as the commandment to pay the workers just wages in Lev 19:13, but already in this example there is no interest in the whole text of Lev 19, and in particular, people are not interested in the prohibition to mix animals, crops and textiles in Lev 19:19, which is considered to be typically “Jewish”. On the other hand, there is the Christian practice that discredits texts from the Book of Leviticus by considering them as having been relativized by Jesus or as no longer in force because of him, thus e.g. the texts on purity and impurity, on the way of dealing with lepers, on reparation by means of sacrifices in the Temple. One could almost say: Christians’ traditional sense of superiority as regards Jews seeks and finds popular arguments precisely in the Book of Leviticus.

Faced with such a situation – the Book of Leviticus as a central book for Jews and a book that is more likely to be marginalized by Christians – it is an important book for Christian-Jewish dialogue, which wants to reduce mutual misunderstandings and to rediscover and strengthen shared predetermined elements – precisely in dealing with the biblical texts that are common to Jews and Christians. Of course, Jews and Christians read the Book of Leviticus in different ways, but in their various ways of reading, they also have much in common.

2. The Book of Leviticus as the centre of the Torah / the Pentateuch

In my opinion, the most important insight that Jews and Christians can share with one another is the observation or ascertainment that the Book of Leviticus is the centre / the middle of the Torah / the Pentateuch. That means for Jews and for Christians: anyone who does not read the Book of Leviticus properly in accordance with the text, will not understand the Torah’s message.

The five books of the Torah / the Pentateuch tell the story of Israel’s origin and thus hold on to the decisive foundations of Israel’s existence: the election of Israel out of grace by the one and only God, the promise of the land, the liberation from slavery in Egypt, and the gift of a cultic and ethical rule of life. In the narrative’s drama, this story of Israel’s origin begins in the Book of *Genesis* with God’s creation first of all of the world and the peoples as the stage upon which he calls Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and shows them the land, which he promises to give their descendants as a land of blessing and of freedom. The fulfilment of this promise begins in the Book of *Exodus* with God leading his people out of their slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt, with the goal of bringing it into the land of the fathers, to Canaan. The long road there first leads to Mount Sinai, where God reveals himself to his people, where he concludes an eternal covenant with this people, where his people builds a portable sanctuary so that God can always dwell in the midst of his people and travel with it. The Book of *Exodus* ends with the story of the people constructing this sanctuary together. Then comes the Book of *Leviticus*. There, with the mediation of Moses, Israel receives

⁴ M. Noth, *Das dritte Buch Mose. Leviticus*, ATD 3, Göttingen 1962.

from God the basic rules for the cult and ethos, rules for family and societal life together. One could say: here the “house rules” for Israel as God’s family are written, whereby the priests are given a particular responsibility as God’s “domestic servants”. In the first ten chapters of the Book of *Numbers*, Israel is also still at Sinai. There, further orders are given for Israel’s institutional organization. Then, starting in Num 10:11, Israel leaves Sinai and by way of detours reaches the border of the Promised Land as far as Moab. Now the Book of *Deuteronomy* begins. From the literary perspective, it is written as the closing speech or testament of Moses before his death. Here Moses sums up God’s laws and commandments that were previously given at Sinai and he clarifies them in view of life in the Promised Land. In a solemn covenantal ceremony, he obliges the people to live with and according to these commandments. The Book of Deuteronomy and with it the Torah as a whole ends with the death of Moses and before Israel moves across the Jordan into the Promised Land. The journey into the land is not told until the Book of Joshua.

Three things show that the Book of Leviticus was written to be the middle of the five books of the Torah:

1. The book pair Genesis and Deuteronomy as well as the book pair Exodus and Numbers each deal with themes that are parallel to one another, and they embrace the Book of Leviticus like an external and internal frame.
2. At the level of the narrative, Sinai is the topographical middle of Israel’s path from Egypt to Canaan; at Sinai, Israel experiences its decisive formation in the encounter with God.
3. As regards the theme, the Book of Leviticus consists almost entirely in a series of direct speeches by God to Moses and in part also to Aaron, that they are supposed to pass on to Israel. The contents of these speeches form Israel’s constitution as a holy people, which is to say, as a people set apart for its God and in whose midst the holy God wants to be present and to work – on the stage of his creation.

3. Structure and program of the Book of Leviticus

The place from which God speaks is the sanctuary, i.e. the Tent of Meeting that the people had set up at the foot of Sinai as YHWH’s dwelling place and that he accepted as such when the cloud that was hovering over Mount Sinai settled over the sanctuary and the glory of YHWH filled the Tent of Meeting, as is also recounted at the end of the Book of Exodus. So if the holy God dwells in the midst of his people and can thus continue to dwell here, Israel must design its life correspondingly: it must give YHWH respect and homage in the sanctuary by means of sacrifices. It must seek cultic communion with him and if possible avoid everything that could disturb this communion or even destroy it. That is why there are numerous instructions in Leviticus that are meant to guarantee and foster Israel’s lived holiness, as well as others concerning the ways in which unavoidable disturbances to that holiness as well as their damaging consequences can be removed.

At first glance, the world view that forms the backdrop for Leviticus with its contrast pure-impure and its concentration on the divine holiness as a “source of energy” for life might seem strange and incomprehensible to us. But there are analogous ideas in our modern ways of seeing the world as well, and these can help us to better understand the Book of Leviticus and to appreciate it in a more appropriate way. Today we talk about harmful substances that pollute the ground and the air and that are ticking away as “time bombs”; or we talk about ecological catastrophes that in many ways disturb and threaten our entire climate and our whole life. Such catastrophes must be prevented by prophylactic means, and if they occur anyway, their traces must be removed thoroughly so that they aren’t or won’t become a danger to life. Precisely this “concern” is behind the

many regulations in Leviticus for the protection of “purity” and for dealing with unavoidable “impurity”. The point is the prevention of threats and the elimination of “dangerous substances” – always at the service of preserving life and of avoiding obstacles that will stand in the way of the working of God’s holiness. But the point is above all the sanctification of every-day life so that the holy God can remain present in the midst of his people as the God who sanctifies and blesses. That is why the Book of Leviticus presents all of its regulations as the gift of the holy God himself.

We have to understand the theology of Leviticus on the horizon of the theology of creation outlined in Gen 1–9. That is first of all appropriate because the Tent of Meeting is presented by the biblical narrators in Ex 25–31.35–40 as God’s dwelling place, the “house of the Creator God”, in analogy to the universe as the “house of life” (cf. Gen 1:1–2:3) and to Noah’s ark as the “house of life” that saves from chaos (cf. Gen 6–9). That is why the establishment of this sanctuary is called “creation within creation”. But above all, the guiding principle in the house rule and the rule of life outlined in Leviticus corresponds with the idea of creation in Gen 1: the point is to observe the fundamental life-promoting rules in Gen 1. And over and beyond Gen 1, it includes the view of the world that is recognizable in Gen 9, according to which the disturbances to the rule of life are part of the world’s reality. The Book of Leviticus offers possibilities for re-establishing at least partially the order of creation that is disturbed over and over again, and it shows ways to strengthen the regulations that promote life by means of a corresponding ritual and ethical (!) life. So the book deals with instructions on how Israel is to live as a holy people, and with the gift of “tools” so that Israel can remain YHWH’s holy people in spite of the unavoidable ritual and ethical “impurities”.

The Book of Leviticus can be divided into seven parts (1–7; 8–10; 11–15; 16–17; 18–20; 21–22; 23–27), which form a concentric composition. At the centre with chapters 16–17 is the message of the God who is willing to be reconciled and who forgives (the rite of the Day of Atonement and the gift of the blood as the means for the purifying atonement). Starting with chapters 16–17 as the centre, the order of the remaining parts of the book is a systematic mirror image:

A	1–7	Sacrificial regulations
B	8–10	Priestly services
C	11–15	Purity in every-day life
D	16–17	Atonement and reconciliation
C	18–20	Holiness in every-day life
B	21–22	Priestly services
A	23–27	Feast day regulations

The Book of Leviticus is a “reader” on the grace and the consequences of God’s closeness. Its guideline, “You are to be holy for I, your God, am holy and I want to dwell in your midst”, remains relevant for Judaism and in a different way for Christianity, even if some of the ideas (e.g. on sexuality) and many concrete implementations (e.g. animal sacrifices) no longer correspond to our way of understanding the world. But some details, as e.g. those that stress the importance of respect for the order of creation, have received new relevance in the context of the ecological and bioethical discussions. As well, the ritual sanctification of daily life and the sanctification of time through shared feasts that is very central in Leviticus, as well as the very strong emphasis in Leviticus on the social dimension of individual misdemeanours, are aspects, the rediscovery of which could be helpful and life-giving for 21st century Christianity.

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