The Relevancy of Leviticus

Leprous skin diseases, dietary restrictions, and instructions for sacrifice. Considering the technological milieu of the 21st century and the fact Christians are under a new covenant through Jesus Christ, these are just a few of the seemingly irrelevant topics in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Indeed, when people read through Leviticus in our current age, the meticulous detail and thoroughly prose style of writing can render them fatigued and, dare I say, bored. Understandably then, this third book of the Pentateuch has gained an unfortunate reputation for its tedium, but thankfully there have been recent commentators who have mined practical gems for current day Christians from Leviticus' cavernous reservoire of wisdom. Despite the widespread stigma of Vayikra (the Hebrew name for Leviticus, which actually means "And He called" - the first three words of Leviticus), this paper will employ some of those audacious authors' writings to first clear some misconceptions and then provide three different pragmatic principles for 21st century Christians to prove Leviticus' timeless relevancy.

The first seven chapters of Leviticus concern sacrifices and are where many misunderstandings originate. For example, one is that "The Israelites brought most of their sacrifices to pay the penalty for their sins." To reform this statement into a more accurate paradigm, it is necessary to deconstruct some words. First, the word we typically translate as "sacrifice" is *korban* in Hebrew. Because the root word is *karav* (to come near), *korban* is not best understood as a “sacrifice” or “offering” but “something brought near.” This makes more sense, because Leviticus' beginning verses insinuate that man cannot "come near" to God's presence in the Tabernacle. Why? God is holy and separate from sin. Hence, only a *korban* can allow a person to safely approach God.

Another close translation of *korban* is a “voluntary gift.” The first three *korbans* mentioned in Leviticus - the burnt offering, cereal offering, and peace offering - are indeed voluntary gifts since they are not mandated by God to cleanse away sin. Only the other two - the sin offering and guilt offering - are required as atonement for one's failings. Surprisingly though, most of the offerings in the Bible are “voluntary gifts” which are brought by a joyful worshipper. This clarifies the misconception and actually asserts the opposite is true: Most of the sacrifices were not intended to propitiate God's wrath and judgment on a person's sins, but as voluntary gifts which brought a person near to God's presence.

Having addressed that crucial misinterpretation, we can now accurately explicate the first relevant insight Leviticus offers on worship - confession and repentance of sins should be done first in a worship gathering before praise and worship. This statement comes from the order of the first three *korbans* in Vayikra. When a person came to the tabernacle, the first offering was the burnt offering, in which a bull, lamb, goat, turtledove, or pigeon was completely set aflame. Aaron and his sons, in fact, began and ended each day with this *olah* (the Hebrew name of the burnt offering), meaning “rising up.” The significance of the *olah* was complete surrender to God. Just as the animal was completely consumed, so the worshipper completely gave his heart, mind, and soul to God.

Part of this process was the declaration of the Israelite that he would state his intentions to follow God's ways and confess his sins to the Levitical priest. Only then could he continue with his *minchah* (literally meaning "tribute"), the cereal offering. The purpose of the *minchah* was to express appreciation and pay tribute to a divine overlord. This was done by burning oil and flour, along with a pinch of salt and incense. As the pleasant smelling aroma was rising to the Lord, so too was the worshipper's gratitude for the Lord's protection and provision. What

usually followed was the peace offering, or in Hebrew, *shelamim.* Like the *olah,* the animal had to be unblemished and from the herd or flock, but unlike the *olah,* the peace offering was a meal between the Israelite, his friends and family, the priesthood, and God. Indeed, the worshipper could invite his entire family and friends - as long as they were in the state of being “clean” - to partake in the *shelamim,* rendering this offering as a representation of mutual goodwill and peace between God and man.

The pattern of these first three korbans greatly teach one about approaching God. One of the chapters in The Torah Club's *Shadow of the Messiah* beautifully articulates it: "Before one may draw near to God and enjoy the fellowship of peace of God, partaking in the table of the LORD, he must first deal with the obstacles to fellowship. The [burnt] offering acknowledges his unworthiness, his sinful and errant ways, and his uncleanness before the pure, righteous, infinite God. The burnt offering represents total giving over to God, a surrender to His absolute sway and an abandonment of self. Only after...the self has been surrendered to God is the worshiper ready to enjoy peace and fellowship with the Almighty as symbolized by the peace offering (553)."

This reminds the reader that confession and absolution is a prerequisite of praise and worship. In other words, to enjoy the fellowship of God and praise Him with tributes and meals, one must have his life surrendered and sins forgiven. Thankfully we 21st century Christians don't need to slay animals to accomplish that, because Jesus Christ has already done so by being the perfect sacrifice. Still though, the pattern of *olah* - *michnah* - *shelamim* provide an order of true worship for us 4,000 years later. Worship needs to commence with a confession of sins and a receiving of God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ before praise and worship songs can be sung. There are many ways to accomplish this, but besides the typical confession and absolution liturgy, perhaps a worship song about repentance could start the worship set.

One may ask, what about the last two sacrifices? What were their significance? The fourth offering mentioned in Leviticus is the sin (or purification) offering, also known as the *chattat* (literally meaning "sin"). The sin offering was usually a bull, goat, lamb, dove, pigeon, or one tenth of an ephah of flour and was an atoning sacrifice for sins of omission and inadvertency. The fifth and final sacrifice, the *asham* (literally meaning "guilt"), was another propitiating sacrifice for sin - this time those of known offense and deliberancy. Interestingly enough, only a male lamb or ram could be used as a guilt (or reparation) offering. These last two offerings were occasional and hence were not part of the *olah - michnah - shelamim* pattern used above.

To dissect the next point, however, the *chattat* offering will now greatly be utilized. As mentioned earlier, a number of different animals were used for this sacrifice - a bull, goat, lamb, dove, and pigeon typically. Each one, though, held a different significance and was used by certain people. For example, only *priests* brought bulls for the *chattat* as it says in Leviticus 4:3, "If the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people, he must bring to the LORD a young **bull** without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed." Nineteen verses later, Leviticus details how *leaders within the tribe* slaughtered goats instead: "When a leader sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the commands of the LORD his God, he is guilty. When he is made aware of the sin he committed, he must bring as his offering a **male goat** without defect." Lastly, a *common person* was not expected to bring as valuable an offering as one of the priests or tribal leaders. In Lev. 4:27 it states, "If a member of the community sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD'S commands, he is guilty. When he is made aware of the sin he committed, he must bring as his offering for the sin he committed a **female goat** without defect."

Almost immediately after that verse (Levitcus 4:32 to be exact), the law stated if the common person could not afford a female goat, then he or she could bring a lamb ("If he brings a lamb as his sin offering, he is to bring a female without defect") and if too poor for a lamb, two doves or pigeons. Alas, ultimately if the poor fellow could not afford any of the above, then a tenth of an ephah of fine flour was sufficient enough (Lev. 5:11-12). What's the purpose of all these words and verses? They demonstrate a sliding scale between various kinds of people because certain situations required this obligatory sacrifice and God graciously did not enforce every single person, whether rich or poor, to bring an expensive bull for the *chattat.*

There is perhaps another reason for this sliding scale. Maybe the sin of a priest accounted for more weight than a tribal leader, and perhaps the sin of the common person accounted for far less weight than a priest. Let's compare the animals used again:

priest	bull
tribal leader	male goat
common person	female goat (doves, pigeons, or flour)

Upon reflection, a pattern emerges - A person with more responsibility needed a more expensive sacrifice. Again, this is perhaps because the people with more responsibility incur more account for their sin than people with less responsibility. In other words, ministers and clergy have a higher standard of judgment compared to the laity.

Gordon Wenham, in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament, certainly thinks so. He writes, "Leviticus shows that the sin of Israel's leaders was considered more serious than that of ordinary people. The high priest had to offer more valuable animals than the ordinary

man. So too the NT insists that God's judgment on Church members is proportionate to their responsibility. “Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required” (Luke 12:48). “We who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (Jas. 3:1)....(p. 103)." If this idea is seriously considered and taken as a principle, it would help remind church leaders to be more sensitive to their actions and ultimately keep the Church less susceptible to the periodic, embarrassing debacles of sin displayed by pastors and elders, especially evidenced more in the 21st century.

The last bit of relevant spiritual insight comes from the sixth and seventh chapters of Leviticus in particular but could be seen extracted from the rest of the book as well. It is the notion that careful attention to detail is one way of expressing reverence to God. The very detailed instructions for the priest and worshipper inside the tabernacle - also for handling leprosy, mold, and dietary restrictions - could be viewed as foreboding and tedious *or* a perfect musical score which is a beautiful challenge to adhere to. Although 21st century Christians should not try to follow the civil and ceremonial laws detailed throughout Leviticus, it would serve everyone well to treat social, musical, and worship etiquette as a challenging musical score. For in fact, one indeed expresses reverence and respect by conforming to etiquette conventions. If a person claps in between movements of a sonata in a concert, the performer would most likely feel transgressed. If a man takes a woman on a date and does not open the restaurant door for her, the woman would perchance feel disrespected. There are many other examples and perhaps an analogy will put this principle in a clearer perspective.

The closer a musician adheres to an octavo score, the more respect he gives to the composer, deceased or not, and the audience. If he follows all the dynamic markings, phrasings, and articulation symbols, the piece is also perceived as effective art. If the musician does not

scrupulously play the dynamics, phrase markings, and articulations, then the piece would essentially be ineffective and respect would be lost on many levels. The same goes for worship. If a minister does not prepare his scripture readings, sermon, and liturgical pieces to a high degree of satisfaction, he compromises the respect of the congregation and how the congregation views God. n fact, if the minister seemed hap-hazard or dull and passionless, the inefficacy of the worship service would perhaps render the notion inside the worship members that God is also ineffective. This would be an egregious mistake and reminds ministers to treat their Sunday preparation with as much reverence and care as the Levitical priests did with their tabernacle instructions.

Having discussed all three points, it is now time to summarize. As one can see, the book of Leviticus is a lot more than leprous skin diseases, dietary restrictions, and instructions for sacrifice. It is full of little gems like the four mined above, but it takes a serious, dedicated prospector to discover them amidst the meticulous sections of detail and prose style of writing. Thomas Lancaster, Gordon Wenham, and Andrew Bonar are just a few of them, but there are plenty more who have audaciously approached Vayikra and exegeted pragmatic principles for 21st century, new covenant Christians. When one accomplishes this, it somewhat reverses the fatiguing and boring stigma of the third book of the Pentateuch and proves its timeless relevancy. Hopefully this paper was successful in doing that by explicating only 3 of the numerous spiritually practical principles in Leviticus: 1) confession and absolution is a prerequisite for praise and worship, 2) ministers and clergy have a higher standard of judgment, 3) careful attention to detail and etiquette is one way expressing reverence to God.

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