Leviticus Resources

# Leviticus: Responses to Questions I Have Been Asked

There is more info in my *Exodus and Leviticus for Everyone* (Louisville: WJK/London: SPCK, 2010).

## Sacrifice

*God demands meticulous attention to detail in the practice of worship. What are the implications of this fact for how we ‘do worship’? How liturgical should we be? Should we imitate any of these details, and if not, what are some ways the principles therein should guide our worship?*

\*\*(a) The NT implies that we needn’t be bound with regard to any of the OT rules in themselves, with all that detail.

(b) The implication of all the detail is that worship easily goes wrong. We worship in light of the culture with all its mistaken assumptions. So we would need to ask, how do the expectations of the culture skew our worship? E.g., we want to be made to feel good through worship; we want to have an experience.

(c) The advantage of liturgy and a lectionary for reading scripture is that it safeguards us from being limited to our current culture

*Why can’t God forgive without sacrifice? Why was sacrifice necessary?*

\*\*The OT doesn’t say that God can’t forgive without sacrifice, and God does forgive without sacrifice a lot (e.g., through Genesis when there wasn’t much sacrifice, and in the exile in Babylon, when there was no sacrifice). Sacrifice doesn’t relate to forgiveness. Sacrifice was necessary as a rite of cleansing, a bit like baptism, so that you don’t come into God’s presence in the sanctuary in an unclean state and thereby make the sanctuary unclean and make it hard for God to be there. So God provides a way of dealing with the defilement. (Of course sacrifice had other meanings, such as an expression of self-giving or of fellowship.)

*Leviticus assumes animal sacrifices, but gives no explanation of it.  It is just assumed.  Was this a common practice of the times?  We see sacrifices in Genesis, too.  It just seems like a natural response of humans.  Where does this come from? What are some of the different factors that would be most apparent in a Biblical understanding of the nature and purpose of sacrifice, particularly in light of Christ?*

*\*\**I think animal sacrifice has been a common practice except in one or two odd cultures (like the modern West). It’s presupposed in Genesis 4, where Abel and Cain do it without being told. Sacrifice is a way of telling God we are committed to him, that we love him, that we are grateful for what he has done for us, that we know we need cleansing, and that we know we need to make recompense for wrong we have done. Christ’s coming did not change most of that, but the destruction of the temple in AD 70 did. Maybe it helps if we see one aspect of animal sacrifice as a feast or a party or a BBQ (that’s what the fellowship sacrifice was). We all like a party. People want to be able to enjoy a feast with God. Remember that the OT often assumes that you would only eat meat in the context of such a sacrificial meal. Whenever you have a BBQ, you invite God.

*Given the significance of sacrifice in the Old Testament, are there ways we ought to continue the tradition symbolically today?  Or, if Christ has become the atoning sacrifice, how can we benefit from OT sacrifices in a “hands-on” way today?*

\*\*That’s a good question. One thing it summons us to is worship that involves something more than our heads and voices – it involves our whole persons. In theory Holy Communion fits here, before it became just a bit of bread and a sip of wine. It’s worth trying to think of other ways in which we make our worship more outward. Writing down sins or promises and burning them is an example. I was once at an camp service where someone poured a bottle of good wine onto the campfire!

*If symbolic practices of sacrifice such as tithing, obedience and service are beneficial to concretize our healthy relationship with God, then what is the harm in not limiting it to a holy place.  There are some places in this physical world that are powerful in helping us to relate better God, whether they be churches, forests or meadows.*

\*\*What happened with Israel is that people then lost the key truths about Yahweh as the one who delivered them from Egypt etc. They just thought of God as a nature God – like new age religion. Having a dedicated place safeguards against that.

*I have always wondered about the amount of blood that had to be present. What was done with it? Was there a drain? Did it dry up? Did they ever wash it off? What about the altar, did it have caked blood on it? What about the smell of that? What about the garments? I know it seems silly, but wasn’t this unsanitary and smelly? Why not burn it up?Why was the rest of the animal burned outside the camp for the sin offering?*

\*\*I don't know the answer to those great practical questions, though in broad terms the answer is that the Levites were responsible for all that. I guess not burning it relates to the fact that blood is the symbol of life, of the gift of life that came from God, so letting it soak into the ground is a way of honoring that fact. Burning the rest of the sin-offering outside the camp recognized the fact that the animal had come to be identified with the pollution in connection with which it was offered—so it is taken outside the camp, which you did not want to be polluted.

*Why is there not more corporate prayer in these stories, rather than just priestly sacrifice and Moses interceding on the peoples' behalf?*

I think the Psalms give you the words that go with the sacrifices.

*I was born and raised being taught that Sabbath is the day of worship. But in Korean/Chinese term, it literally means “day of rest.” What was it like for the Israelites? What did they do on the day of rest? Did they have a specific day of worship? What did worship mean to them?*

*\*\**There’s very little indication that worship and Sabbath were related. As you imply, the point about the Sabbath is rest, and the heads of families letting the entire extended family rest. Keeping off it instead of working is a way you recognize that it belongs to God. The rhythm of worship wasn’t weekly based. It was based on a daily routine (prayer at dawn and sunset) and a yearly routine (the great week-long festivals), and on praying and giving thanks whenever you were in need and God rescued you. But it wouldn’t be surprising if the Sabbath was also the day when parents would especially do the kind of teaching that Deuteronomy speaks of.

## The Rules

*When the scriptures say that we are not to worship toward carved images and that there are certain practices that “God hates,” how culturally and historically bound are those statements? If we are to take them as timeless, then we should do away with statues, icons, etc. I would imagine that there were other pagan rituals going on at that time that included such things.*

\*\*Everything in scripture is expressed in terms that relate to its culture, but it’s also an expression of principle. So we have to ask what principle underlies (e.g.) the prohibition on images. Sometimes it's difficult to tell, though in this case Deuteronomy 4 tells us: the problem with images is that they can't represent God, because God is someone who acts and speaks. They give the impression that God is static. So the question would be, are Christian statues and icons capable of representing the Christian God adequately enough or do they have too much of the same disadvantage. If the icon or statue isn’t an expression of God, this problem doesn’t arise. In general, playing the "culturally-conditioned" card is dangerous. It provides us with a way of sidelining anything in scripture that doesn't fit our culture. I am more interested in seeing how scripture critiques my culture.

*Were clean/taboo regulations for God or more for the people, to remind them that they were distinctive and holy? Does anyone argue that Israel adapted these rules from another religion?*

\*\*They were both for God and for the people, I guess. They are basically similar to the customs of other peoples but Yahweh makes them the means of teaching something distinctive. The fact that they are similar to (e.g.) African customs suggests they are more universal human phenomena than that the Israelites learned them from another people, like the practice of sacrifice. It is we who are odd for not sharing them, and we miss out—for instance, soldiers who come back from war can feel the need of cleansing, but we have no rituals to help them.

*If certain created things are impure and incompatible with God, how are we to interpret Colossians 1:15-20 where it says that all things are created in Christ?*

\*\*That’s a great question? I guess one could ask it on the basis of the Torah itself, since Genesis 1 says God created those things—and there are verbal links between Genesis 1 and Leviticus 11 (the expression “after its kind” recurs in both chapters). I wonder if the answer is that one reason for the purity rules is simply to distinguish Israel from other peoples not because there is anything inherently wrong (e.g.) with eating pork. That was part of God’s strategy for reaching the world through Israel—and it was working quite well in NT times, as many Gentiles were being attracted to Judaism. So that was the point at which God reversed the strategy and cancelled the distinction between pure and impure so as to reach out to Gentiles (Acts 10). You could say God was reaffirming the creation status of everything.

*Why can’t you drink blood?*

*\*\**Because it’s a symbol of God-given life, in the sense that when you lose your blood you lose your life.

*I am puzzled about the only two death penalty crimes that I would disagree with: death for  
hitting one’s parents and death for cursing one’s parents. We obviously do not view this as serious as God did then and are missing something in this command that leaves many readers wondering why God would require this as a punishment; it does not seem to fit the crime.* \*\*I am surprised that these are the only death penalty crimes you would disagree with – there are lots of others! As far as we can tell, Israel never took these penalties literally and imposed an actual death penalty. The many wrongs that the death penalty applies to are shown by that to be really bad. In this case, the way the community and family work depends on people looking after their parents as they grow old, rather than abusing them. If children don’t look after their parents, the parents die. Cursing can be powerful—it can bring about terrible things.

*Why is God so harsh to people with leprosy—throwing them out of the camp?*

*\*\**By leprosy the Bible doesn’t mean the disease we think of, but more a skin ailment, as you can tell from the extensive discussion in Leviticus 13. The best guess about the problem with it is that it looks deathly (see Numbers 12:12). Death and God are antithetical—you don’t go into the sanctuary when you have been in contact with death. So as long as people are “deathly” they keep away from the sanctuary, to avoid defiling it, and even keep outside the camp to make sure their defilement doesn’t spread to other people.

*How do you know when it is “theoretical law” (e.g., jubilee) or how do you know when it is “literal law” (e.g., do what it says or reap the wrath)?*

\*\*We won’t always know. I am not *sure* Jubilee was not a literal law. But that doesn’t make any difference to its being there in scripture with a challenge to take seriously what it wants to achieve.

*What would be the modern economic implications of the Torah—e.g., what would it look like to celebrate jubilee and freeing of slaves in our context?*

*\*\**One implication of jubilee is that land belongs to families. It is families that own farms and work them, and jubilee ensures that this principle continues to apply. The development of agri-business contrasts with that assumption. Likewise the rules about servants mean that people who lose their land have a chance to get back into a normal life of work. There is no such thing as unemployment.

*I can see that the “economic” laws in the Torah have a lot to teach us but the laws about women seem primitive to us.*

\*\*You have to look at what the laws about women are seeking to constrain. Without these laws, women would be more vulnerable to husbands being suspicious of them, throwing them out, having sex with whoever they like. The laws start from the fact that men will act in that way and offer safeguards against the consequences. Not every woman in West or in other countries would find the rules about women unwelcome in this respect.

*Leviticus has a lot to say about sex. What does the OT law imply regarding contraception (condoms, birth control pills, vasectomy)? How or would your answer differ to a woman whose husband has HIV/Aids?*

\*\*Obviously it has nothing direct to say. What it would do is help you set the question in light of an understanding of what sex is for, and thus give you a broader perspective than the one we would have just from our culture, where sex has got divorced from romance, commitment, marriage, and procreation. But you would need to set what the OT law says in the context of the rest of scripture – e.g., the Song of Songs rejoicing in sex and romance separate from procreation, and the NT enthusing about celibacy. With regard to the second bit of the question, the Torah’s concern to protect women from abuse by men would be significant.

*Why are land rights so important?*

\*\*Because your land is your means of having something to eat.