

# HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

A course in Biblical literacy

How to read...

## LEVITICUS

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### Themes

#### 1. The Sacrificial System

- Order
- Costly to penitent
- Self-scrutiny
- Daily rites

#### Discussion Question 1

Read Hebrews 10:1-4, 17-18.

These passages free the Christian from the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant. Does this mean that we can ignore everything to do with the practice of the Levitical sacrificial rite?

#### Hebrews 10: 1-4; 17-18 (NIV)

*The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.<sup>3</sup> But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

<sup>17</sup> Then he adds:

*“Their sins and lawless acts  
I will remember no more.”*

<sup>18</sup> And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

#### 2. The Food Laws / Kashrut

- Meat consumption and sacrifice
- Clean and unclean creatures
- Purpose of the food laws

#### Discussion Question 2

Read Acts 10:9-15. Peter's vision liberates the new Christian community from the observance of the Levitical food laws. This must have been very challenging for Jewish Christians. But does it mean there is nothing for us to learn from the dietary teaching in Leviticus?

#### Acts 10: 9-15 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup> He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup> He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. <sup>12</sup> It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. <sup>13</sup> Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

<sup>14</sup> “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

<sup>15</sup> The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

### 3. Uncleaness, Boundaries and the Integrity of Creation

- Ritual uncleaness
- Boundaries and the integrity of creation

#### Discussion Question 3

In Leviticus, hybrid phenomena – things of mixed character – are seen as violating the integrity of creation. What place is there, if any, for maintaining boundaries in the Christian era? (Suggestion: think about this in an era of genetic manipulation, performance-enhancing technologies, human-animal hybrids and the like).

#### Summing up

- The seriousness of transgression
- The costliness of atonement
- The need for self-scrutiny
- The maintenance of daily practices that recalled their identity as God's people
- The call to respect the integrity of creation
- The importance of social justice

#### Further reading:

A detailed commentary is **Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*** (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979). For a compelling, though challenging, reading of Leviticus by an anthropologist, see **Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Her earlier classic *Purity and Danger*, originally published in 1966, had a very significant chapter entitled "The Abominations of Leviticus", though she subsequently changed her mind on some of her interpretations there. For a Jewish account of the meaning of the food laws, there is an interesting article by **Meir Soloveichik, "Locusts, Giraffes, and the Meaning of Kashrut"**, *Azure* (2006). It is available online at: [http://azure.org.il/download/magazine/1551az23\\_Meir\\_Soloveichik.pdf](http://azure.org.il/download/magazine/1551az23_Meir_Soloveichik.pdf)

### Structure

#### The Sacrificial System

Regulations for the People (1-6:7)

Regulations for the Priests (6:8-7)

#### Institution of the Priesthood (chapters 8-10)

Narrative of Aaron and his sons (8)

Inauguration of the Priesthood (9)

Judgment on Nadab and Abihu (10)

#### Ritual Uncleaness (chapters 11-16)

Food Laws or Kashrut (11)

Regulations around childbirth (12)

Observances governing diseases and discharges (13-15)

Purifying the Temple/Day of Atonement (16)

#### Various laws (chapters 17-27)

Prohibition on blood consumption (17)

Sexual relations (18)

Community living (19)

Sundry crimes (20)

Priestly governance (21-22)

Festivals (23)

Blasphemy (24)

Sabbatical and Jubilee (25)

Call to obedience (26)

**DON'T  
MISS...**

*How to read NUMBERS  
with Graham McGeown*

**SUN 13<sup>th</sup>  
January**