

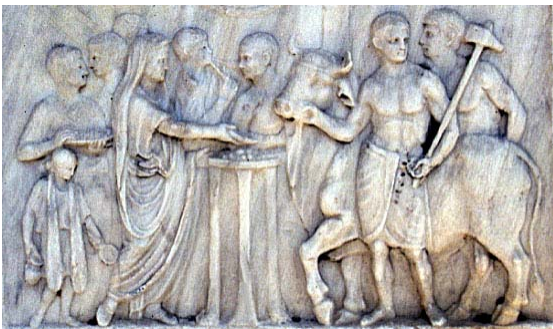
Chapter Eleven

Israelite Sacrificial System: “A Pleasing Odor to the LORD”

Chapter Overview: Although animal sacrifices were quite common in the ancient Near East, collecting blood and burning animal parts on an altar is foreign to the experience of most people today. Interpreting sacrificial laws in the Bible requires that we understand something about the significance given to blood offerings during biblical times. This chapter summarizes the five basic kinds of Israelite sacrifices, offers tips for interpreting the passages specifying rules for these sacrifices, provides an example of how to interpret a particular sacrificial law, and gives specific laws to interpret from Leviticus 1–7. It also explains the concepts of holiness, clean, and unclean, which are important for understanding Leviticus.

Get your fingers out of my nose!!

Students stared quizzically as I strode into the classroom with a prayer shawl over my head, a knife and a bowl in one hand, and a Lamb Chop hand puppet on the other. As they watched me convert the desk in the front of the room into an altar for burnt offerings, they began to exhibit some signs of unease. And when I asked for a volunteer to assist me in offering sacrifice, they squirmed in their chairs. But when I gave the student volunteer the knife and asked him to slit Lamb Chop’s throat so that I could catch the blood in the bowl, sounds of disgust arose from the class. “You’re not going to kill Lamb Chop! No way!!” Ignoring their comments, I explained ancient Israelite sacrificial technique to the volunteer. “An animal’s nose is tender,” I said, “so if you put your fingers into its nose and pull upward, its head will come up. You can then slit its throat, which is necessary to bleed the animal properly.” So he stuck his fingers into Lamb Chop’s nose and bent her head upward and sliced. I simulated collecting blood in the bowl and splashing it against the altar. Some students laughed nervously; others made protesting comments.



Scene of Romans sacrificing a bull.
From Pompei.

I sometimes wonder what would happen if I actually sacrificed a real animal in a classroom. The sights, smell and sounds would nauseate many students, and I am fairly sure that I would be breaking several laws and would get into trouble with various animal rights groups—not to mention the probability that my students would revolt against such an exhibit. Urban people today are far removed from the sacrificial system that seemed natural and good to ancient Israelites. In our day, a small

percentage of people live on farms, so most have no contact with killing and butchering animals for food—meat is something that comes wrapped in plastic at the

grocery store. Experiences common for ancient Israelites seem quite foreign to most folks today. Israelite animal sacrifices, far from seeming unusual to them, mostly accompanied times of family celebration. Slaughtering animals and offering their blood to God meant a big meal—a happy time.

Only a minority of Israelite sacrifices were offered as atonement for sin and therefore accompanied somber occasions. The majority were celebratory in nature: thanksgiving and freewill offerings. This detail often surprises Christians. Christians associate animal sacrifices with the offering of a male lamb as atonement for sin, because several New Testament passages use this imagery to describe Jesus' sacrificial death. For example, the Gospel of John Gospel says concerning John the Baptist, "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'" (John 1:29). Similarly, 1 Peter 1:18–19 states "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish" (see also 1 Corinthians 5:7 and Revelation 5:6, 12). And because Christians predominantly link Jesus' death with the Passover instructions in Exodus 12 to slaughter a year-old lamb without blemish, they are surprised to discover that the sacrificial offering specified to atone for the sin of a common person was a female sheep or goat (Leviticus 4:27–35).

In this chapter we will focus on the specific instructions in Leviticus 1–7 for how to conduct various kinds of sacrifices. These passages stipulate correct sacrificial procedures on where to kill the animal for different sacrifices, what to do with its blood, which portions of the offerings to burn on the altar for God, which portions to give to the priests, and which parts the sacrificers take to eat with their families.

Laws of Sacrifice in Leviticus 1–7

The Hebrew name for **Leviticus** is "And he called" (or "And he summoned") from the first word of the book in the Hebrew text. The title in the Septuagint is *Leuiticon*, which means "The Levitical Book." The Vulgate converts this Greek heading into the Latin *Liber Leviticus*, "The Book of Leviticus," which provides the basis for the English title. The title "Leviticus," however, seems a bit strange; because the book is written for priests and only uses the term "Levite" in 25:32–34 when referring to property in certain cities. Leviticus gives instructions for priests, the sons of Aaron. And although Aaron was from the tribe of Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, only his direct descendents were to function as priests. Perhaps when the Septuagint translation of Leviticus was made in the third century BCE, the word Levite was synonymous with "priest." We do not know for sure.

A major theme in Leviticus is the holiness of God and how Israelites can remain in the good graces of this holy God who is jealous for their absolute loyalty. An important part of fidelity to God was the bringing of sacrificial offerings for various events in the life of the people, and Leviticus provides guidelines for how to accomplish these sacrifices correctly. It also gives instructions on many other matters pertaining to purity. In summary form, the overall content of the book is as follows. Leviticus 1–7 provides instructions for proper procedures to follow when offering sacrifices. Chapters 8–10 deal with ordination of priests. Chapters 11–16 specify laws of cleanness: which animals are clean and can be eaten, how women are purified after childbirth, how to diagnose and deal with different kinds of leprosy, and how to deal with

bodily discharges. Chapter 17 warns against improper sacrifice. Chapters 18–19 give laws regarding sexual relationships (specifically which are illegal), and chapters 20–27 stipulate further regulations for such matters as maintaining loyalty to God, insuring holiness among the priests, celebrating specific feast days, and implementing the year of jubilee in which rural land reverts back to its original owners.

We will focus on Leviticus 1–7, analyzing the way in which the priests were to offer five different kinds of sacrifices. Leviticus 1–5 teaches how to offer the sacrifices, and chapters 6–7 deal with the same sacrifices but give further details on how to administer them. Here is a brief summary of the sacrificial categories.

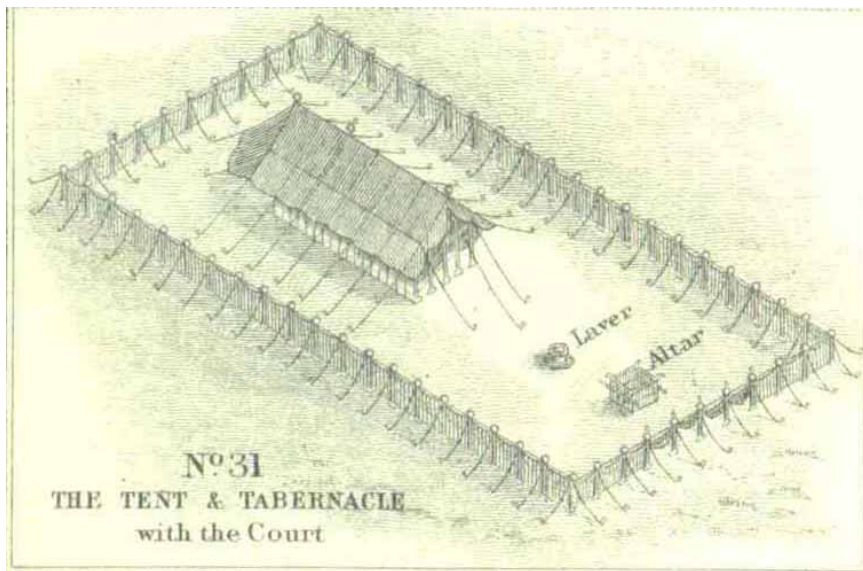
Five Types of Sacrifices

1. **Whole Burnt Offering.** This sacrifice was unusual in that the entire animal (except for the skin) was burnt to ashes instead of only burning token portions on the altar (Leviticus 1:3–17; 6:8–13). The Hebrew word for this sacrifice indicates an “ascending offering” and reflects the belief that the smoke ascended toward heaven as a “pleasing odor” to God (1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9 and so on; remember in Genesis 8:20–21 where God smells the smoke of the sacrifice offered by Noah). The Septuagint translates it with the Greek word “holocaust” (“whole burnt offering”). But because “holocaust” currently describes the Nazi extermination of Jews, use of this word in English translation is no longer a good choice.
2. **Peace Offerings.** These sacrifices were associated with celebrations in response to blessings received from God (Leviticus 3:1–17; 7:11–21, 28–36). There were three basic types: (1) **Thanksgiving Offerings**—made to thank God for blessings; (2) **Vow Offerings**—made to fulfill vows to God; (3) **Freewill Offerings**—made to express gladness in the LORD.
3. **Unintentional Sin Offering.** These sacrifices dealt with purification following specific, unintentional sins. The animals required for these offerings differed according to the importance in society of the person who sinned (Leviticus 4:1–5:3; 6:24–30).
4. **Guilt Offering.** These sacrifices were the same as purification for unintentional sin offerings, except they also required that restitution be paid (Leviticus 5:14–6:7).
5. **Grain Offering.** These sacrifices were offered to God as a means of securing good will (Leviticus 2:1–16; 6:14–18).

Tips for Interpreting Sacrificial Laws

1. **Consider Context.** The sacrificial laws in Leviticus are connected to the larger context of the Exodus narrative. The concluding paragraph of Exodus describes God descending in glory on the **tabernacle** (portable shrine described in detail in Exodus), and Leviticus continues this story with God speaking to Moses from the “tent of meeting.”
2. **Find background information.** Determine what knowledge the passage assumes that readers already possess and then obtain this background information from Bible dictionaries or other resources. For example, the instructions on sacrifice in Leviticus 1–7 presuppose knowledge of the layout of the tabernacle (or “tent of meeting”) described at

length in Exodus. Consequently, having a mental picture of this sacrificial center enhances your understanding of the sacrificial laws in Leviticus. Examine the adjoining reconstructions of the Tabernacle and keep them in mind as you read the laws that explain sacrificial procedures.



Drawing of the tabernacle, showing the sacrificial altar near the entrance, the laver (basin for priests to use for washing), and the holy place (tent within the courtyard).



Modern reconstruction of the Tabernacle, showing the inside of the courtyard. The altar is in the foreground, and the laver is behind it to the left. The tent in the background is the holy place where only priests could enter. Try to imagine a hot fire on the altar, men butchering animals, and priests burning portions of animals on the altar.

3. **Decide which people the law addresses.** For example, Leviticus 1:2 speaks to the general population of Israelites, providing a broad statement on bringing sacrificial animals to the sacred enclosure/tent. Verses 3–9 then give a specific example—an animal from the herd (bull) or from the flock (sheep).
4. **Note the kind of sacrifice described.** For example, Leviticus 1:3–9 gives instructions for a “whole burnt offering”—the incineration of nearly the entire animal.
5. **Determine sacrificial specifications.** Observe the qualifications specified for the sacrifice (animal species and gender—or if it is a grain offering, what kind of grain is used and how it is prepared). Leviticus 1:3 states that the animal must be a male without blemish. It cannot be a wild animal—it must be a domestic animal belonging to the

sacrificer. In this case a bull is offered—an extremely expensive sacrifice that only a wealthy person could afford to bring.

6. **Reconstruct the procedure used for the particular sacrifice.** Leviticus 1:3–9 gives a fairly complete set of instructions for a whole burnt offering.
- a) Sacrificer brings the animal to the entrance of the tabernacle;
 - b) Sacrificer places one hand on the head of the animal, probably as a way of signifying that the animal belongs to that person;
 - c) Sacrificer kills the animal near the entrance of the tabernacle;
 - d) Priest collects the animal's blood and splashes it on all four sides of the altar of sacrifice;
 - e) Sacrificer cuts up the animal into smaller pieces;
 - f) Priest arranges wood on the altar and places the pieces of the animal on the fire—also washes the entrails and legs in the laver near the altar;
 - g) Priest burns the whole as an offering to God.

In this division of labor, the sacrificers are responsible to bring their own animals to the sanctuary and to kill them there. The priests are responsible to perform actions related to the handling of the blood and anything pertaining to the altar of sacrifice.

7. **Locate where the animal is to be sacrificed.** The sacrificial animal in Leviticus 1:3–9 is sacrificed at the entrance to the tent of meeting (1:3–4).
8. **Determine what is done with the various parts of the sacrifice.** Which portions of the animal or grain offering are burned, and which are eaten? Who eats what? Where it is eaten?
9. **Find out what the sacrifice is designed to accomplish.** Leviticus 1:4 stipulates that the whole burnt offering provides atonement for the sacrificer. The Hebrew word for “atonement” indicates the removal of pollution from the sacrificer and a canceling of that person's sin. The animal's life provides a means by which the person makes amends with God and does not suffer God's anger for the sinful act.

Whole Burnt Offering—Leviticus 1:1–9

The LORD summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying: ² Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any of you bring an **offering of livestock** to the LORD, you shall bring your **offering from the herd or from the flock**.

³ If the offering is a **burnt offering** from the herd, you shall offer a **male without blemish**; **[a]** you shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, for acceptance in your behalf before the LORD. ⁴ **[b]** You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be **acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you.** ⁵ **[c]** The **bull** shall be slaughtered before the LORD; and **[d]** Aaron's sons the priests shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁶ **[e]** The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into its parts. ⁷ **[f]** The sons of the priest Aaron shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. ⁸ Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the parts, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; ⁹ but its entrails and its legs shall be washed with water. Then the **[g]** priest shall turn the whole into smoke on the altar as a burnt offering, an offering by fire of **pleasing odor to the LORD.**

Examining Different Sacrifices

The procedure given in Leviticus 1:10–13 for sacrificing a sheep or a goat as a whole burnt offering resembles the more detailed explanation given for offering a bull in 1:3–9. The bird sacrifice in 1:14–17 differs, however, with the priest wringing off the head and tearing it open by the wings. The offering of birds was a provision for poor Israelites who could not afford to bring a goat or a sheep. For example, Leviticus 5:7 states, “**But if you cannot afford a sheep, you shall bring to the LORD, as your penalty for the sin that you have committed, two turtledoves or two pigeons.**”

Leviticus specifies sacrificial offerings for various occasions in the life of the people. For example, 12:1–7 gives instructions for the purification of women following childbirth, specifying that the woman needs to bring a lamb and a pigeon for sacrifice. Then 12:8 adds “**If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean.**”

In the following pages we will look more closely at the various kinds of sacrifices, beginning with the very common freewill offerings.

Freewill Offerings/Offerings of Well Being (3:1–17; 7:11–21, 28–36)

These sacrifices have nothing to do with repentance and atonement but are offerings involving joy and celebration. Most of the meat was eaten *outside* the “tent of meeting” by the sacrificer’s family, so the animal was killed at the tabernacle entrance, not inside the holy area. The kidneys and the appendage of the liver, however, were burned on the altar by a priest (3:4). To understand the background for this type of offering, it helps to know that ancient Israelites considered the kidneys and liver to be delicacies. They also believed that these organs were the center of a person’s emotions—somewhat like we refer to the heart. We say “Follow your heart,” not “Follow your kidneys.” We do not say “I love you with all my kidneys.” Consequently, in biblical passages that use the kidneys to speak of emotions (for example, Psalms 16:7; 73:21; and Jeremiah 11:20), translators substitute the word “heart” so that the text makes more sense to English speakers. For us to say “You broke my kidneys” would sound very odd.

Many people in Israel’s neighboring cultures believed that their priests could discern the will of a god by examining the liver of a sacrificial

Significance of Blood

Leviticus 17:11 provides greater clarity on the significance of blood in sacrificial offerings: “**For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.**” The important Jewish holiday *Yom Kippur* means “Day of Atonement,” and on this day a special sacrifice was offered for all the people in order to avert God’s anger and keep them in God’s favor (see Leviticus 16 for details).



animal. The adjoining picture shows a clay model of a sheep's liver found in Mesopotamia. Notice that the model divides the liver into numerous zones. It was probably a teaching device used to instruct new priests how to interpret divine messages by examining the sacrificial animal's liver. The Babylonian priests considered the lobe of the liver to be particularly important in their analysis, so perhaps the burning of the lobe specified in Leviticus 3:4, 10, 15; 4:9 and 7:4 was a way of distancing Israelites from the practices of polytheistic priests in Mesopotamia.

Questions regarding Freewill Offerings

1. According to 3:1–17, there were no restrictions regarding the *gender* of the sacrificial animal used for freewill offerings. Which *species* of animals could be used?
2. How does the sacrificial procedure in 3:1–17 compare with the one used for whole burnt offerings in 1:3–9?
3. Which portions of the animal were burned on the altar for God?
4. What kind of bread was to be eaten with the thanksgiving offering (7:11–15)? What restrictions were placed on *when* the meat must be eaten?
5. If the sacrifice was a votive offering (given to fulfill a vow) or a freewill offering (given to ask God for something), when must the meat be eaten (7:16–21)?
6. According to 7:28–36, which portions of the offerings of well being were eaten by the priests?

Fill in the following table to show how parts of the offering of well being were distributed.

God's portion	Priest's portion	Sacrificer's portion

Because offerings of well being were strictly voluntary, no allowance was made for poor people to bring birds instead of larger animals. The festive meals that accompanied these sacrifices fed a number of people, so a few small birds would not be adequate for such celebrations.

Sacrifices for Unintentional Sins (4:1–5:13; 6:24–30)

Leviticus 4:1–5:13; 6:24–30 specify particular sacrifices were for *unintentional* sins, not for intentional sins. Although you will notice many procedural similarities between these sacrifices and the whole burnt offerings, you will also see some differences.

Questions regarding Sacrifices for Unintentional Sins

1. What types of sacrifices were specified for people at various levels of society?

	Species of animal or type of flour	Gender (if from herd or flock)	Place where animal was slaughtered
Anointed Priest			
Whole Congregation			
Ruler			
Common Person	1. 2. 3. 4.	1. 2.	

2. How did the way in which the priests handled of the blood of these sacrifices differ from the way they handled blood for the whole burnt offering?
3. Which parts of the animal were burned on the altar?
What was done with the rest of the animal?

The sacrifice for the “anointed priest” (another title for “high priest”) was larger than that required for a ruler of the people because the potential for contaminating the holy place was greater if the anointed priest sinned. The high priest represented the people before God, so if he was defiled it affected the entire congregation. And because he ministered in the holy place, his uncleanness would affect the holiness of the tabernacle.

Penalty for Deliberate Sin

“But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts the LORD, and shall be cut off from among the people. Because of having despised the word of the LORD and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt.”
(Numbers 15:30–31)

Holy, Clean and Unclean in Leviticus

Leviticus 6:24–30 exhibits concern with the holiness of the sacrifice for sin. Only priests could eat portions of it; and, according to the *New Revised Standard Version* translation, “whatever touches its flesh shall become holy” (some scholars argue that the correct translation is “whoever touches it must be holy”). Although many modern readers connect the concept of “holiness” with moral and ethical behavior, this understanding does not match the meaning in Leviticus. In Leviticus 1–7, **holiness** describes a person or object that was set aside or consecrated for God. For example, Israelite priests conducted a ritual involving blood to purify the altar of sacrifice: “Also you shall offer a sin offering for the altar, when you make atonement for it, and shall anoint it, to consecrate it. Seven days you shall make atonement for the altar, and consecrate it, and the altar shall be most holy; whatever touches the altar shall become holy” (Exodus 29:36–37). Similarly, when Aaron and his sons were consecrated for priestly service, blood was used: “Then you shall take some of the blood that is on the altar, and some of the

anointing oil, and sprinkle it on Aaron and his vestments and on his sons and his sons' vestments with him; then he and his vestments shall be holy, as well as his sons and his sons' vestments" (Exodus 29:21). Once consecrated, however, the priests needed to avoid touching anything that was unclean, because uncleanness was transferred through touch. Unclean people touching a holy object or person contaminated the object or person (Leviticus 5:2–3). Therefore, extreme care was taken to avoid contaminating holy objects and holy people.

There were also degrees of holiness, with the areas closest to God considered most holy. The **“holy of holies”** (the innermost shrine of the tabernacle containing the ark of the covenant) was most holy, and only the high priest could enter it—once a year on the day of atonement—and then only after an extensive purification ritual. The “holy place” outside the holy of holies was limited to priests. Outside the holy place, Levites could serve around the altar of burnt offering. Common people who were in a state of ritual cleanness could enter the outer court of the tabernacle. The camp outside the tabernacle was for common Israelites and resident aliens. Outside of the camp was a place for those people who were temporarily unclean. Separated entirely from the camp was the place where those with terminal uncleanness, such as leprosy, lived. And the wilderness was considered a haunt of unclean animals and demons. Viewing wilderness areas as places for recreation enjoyed by outdoor enthusiasts is a modern concept.



Reconstruction of the Ark of the Covenant located in the “holy of holies.”

Sacrificial offerings also had differing levels of holiness. The sin offering, for example, was “most holy” (6:25), and only the priest who offered it could eat the meat; and he had to eat it in the “holy place” (6:26). By contrast, the common people ate their portion of the sacrifices of well being outside the tent of meeting courtyard (the priests got the breast and right thigh; 7:30–36).

Approaching holy objects in a condition of ritual impurity involved danger: **“Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst”** (15:31). Handling holy objects in a way contrary to instructions also involved great risk. Two of Aaron’s sons died after they used fire that was not taken from the holy altar of sacrifice and they performed some sort of banned ritual. **“Now Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the LORD, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD”** (10:1–2).

Obviously care was needed. Priests must be clear on their tasks and not have their judgment clouded by alcohol. Although drinking wine was a common part of Israelite society, priests were forbidden to drink while on duty. **“Drink no wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons, when you enter the tent of meeting, that you may not die; it is a statute forever**

throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean” (15:9–10).

Priests were to maintain strict rules to keep them in a state of **ritual purity**. They also had to meet certain specifications with respect to their physical condition in order not to degrade the holy place. As sacrificial animals needed to be without blemish (22:17–25), so the priests who offered them in sacrifice could not be deformed.

No one of your [Aaron] offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. ¹⁸ For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, ¹⁹ or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, ²⁰ or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. ²¹ No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD’s offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. ²² He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. ²³ But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the LORD; I sanctify them. (Leviticus 21:17–23)

And, as we saw in the previous chapter on law codes, certain physical conditions also exempted the common worshipers. “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 23:1–2).

To appear before God in the tabernacle required Israelites to be **clean**, which does not simply mean washed in a bath. They must be in a condition of ritual purity. This condition required constant vigilance—being aware of what caused uncleanness and the consequences regarding worship. Some common events in life rendered people temporarily **unclean**, although the events in themselves were not bad. Giving birth to children, for example, was highly prized in Israelite society; and a woman’s monthly period is entirely natural. Yet because of the blood loss involved in these normal events, a menstruating woman or a new mother was considered ceremonially unclean and could not approach holy objects for a set amount of time.

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. ³ On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. ⁴ Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. ⁵ If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days.

⁶ When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. ⁷ He shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female. (Leviticus 12:2–7)

The text does not explain why a woman was considered unclean for twice as long after giving birth to a girl. Scholars are therefore left to speculate, and you can read a number of possible explanations in commentaries on Leviticus.

Although uncleanness need not have anything at all to do with sin, it may result from disobedience. Conditions of uncleanness vary from mild to more significant. People who become unclean through minor reasons, like touching the carcass of an unclean animal, take a bath, wash their clothes and are unclean until sunset (Leviticus 11:24–31; 22:6–7). Men who have a discharge of semen require seven days before being considered clean again, as do women when they have their monthly periods—yet anyone who touches an unclean man or woman is only unclean until evening (see Leviticus 15:2–24).

Some illnesses resulted in permanent uncleanness. Leviticus 13–14, for example, provides detailed directions for how priests were to diagnose leprosy. Today the term leprosy refers to a chronic infectious disease resulting from *Mycobacterium leprae*, which disfigures the skin and destroys peripheral nerves. In Leviticus, however, the term used for leprosy covers a fairly wide array of conditions, ranging from the lethal disease to mere mildew in a house. Prescriptions for treatment vary with the diagnosis. If the priest diagnosed a person’s skin condition to be leprosy, the leper had to live at a distance from others.

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (13:45–46)

Priests also examined clothing that had “leprosy”—in this case some sort of mildew—and prescribed a range of treatments (13:47–59). If the owner of the garment could not get rid of the problem, the garment was burned. Similarly, a house with “leprosy” (mildew) in the walls necessitated a priest to inspect it. The “diseased” stones were removed and the walls scraped. If the house recovered and the “leprosy” did not spread further, the priest did a purification ritual so that the house would be clean again (14:48–53). But if they could not eliminate the “leprosy” from the walls, they had to “have the house torn down, its stones and timber and all the plaster of the house, and taken outside the city to an unclean place” (14:45).

Purity did not just affect Israelite entry into the tabernacle. It also defined their lives as a people set aside for God. As we have already seen in Deuteronomy 14, some animals were considered unclean and therefore not to

be eaten. Leviticus 11 expands these kosher food laws in the context of explaining “clean” and “unclean.”



Sacrificial scene from Pompeii, showing Romans preparing to sacrifice a bull, a ram and a pig.

Interestingly, some animals that were unclean to eat were nevertheless valuable as work animals (for example, the camel, 11:4, or the horse, neither of which has divided hoofs or chews the cud). As time went on, Jewish people viewed the pig came as especially unclean, and their refusal to eat pork distinguished them from other societies. In the ancient Near East, various cultures not only considered pigs to be valuable for meat, but they also viewed them as good sacrificial offerings for their gods.

The laws in the Pentateuch warned Israelites against copying the worship practices of polytheistic peoples. For example, although sex is an important part of life, sexual acts were banned from the holy place. Unlike people in the surrounding cultures who had temples devoted to fertility in which men engaged in sexual intercourse with temple prostitutes, Israelites were to shun such activities. Similarly, although death is a natural event, those who came in contact with a corpse were not to enter the tabernacle for a prescribed time of purification. This stipulation distinguished Israelite practice from the common Near Eastern custom of ancestor worship. So although Israelite sacrificial practices were in many ways similar to the ways people in other cultures sacrificed to their deities, there were also some fundamental differences.

Questions regarding Guilt Offering with Restitution (Leviticus 5:14–6:7)

1. From Leviticus 5:14–16, what kind of offense necessitated a guilt offering?
2. How do the requirements in 5:14–16 for the guilt offering differ from the other sacrifices studied so far?
3. What was the intended result of the sacrifice in 5:14–16?
4. From our perspective, at least, why is it problematic to call the sins listed in 6:1–5 “unintentional”?

Grain Offering (Leviticus 2:1–16; 6:14–18)

When analyzing these passages in Leviticus, it is helpful to know the following details.

- Leaven, or yeast, produces fermentation in bread dough, causing the bread to expand or “rise.” Although eating leavened bread was quite common, during certain times of the year, Israelites ate unleavened bread. For example, during the seven days of the Passover celebration, they ate unleavened bread as a way of remembering the swift way in which their ancestors left Egypt (Exodus 12:14–20, 39).
- Honey was a very common sweetener, and it was also widely used in ancient Near Eastern religious rituals. Texts from Ugarit, Egypt and Babylon specify the use of honey in sacrifices.
- “Choice (or fine) flour” was made from wheat, not barley.
- “Oil” designated olive oil.
- Salt was highly valued as a preservative as well as for adding flavor to food. Salt was commonly used as part of covenant ceremonies where people pledged faithfulness to promises they made to each other. Numbers 18:19 and 2 Chronicles 13:5 use the expression “salt of the covenant.”

Questions regarding Grain Offerings

1. What characteristics do all of the grain offerings share in common?
2. How much of the grain offerings were burned on the altar and how much did the priests get to eat?

Variations within Sacrificial Laws

As you interpret sacrificial laws in the Hebrew Bible, do not assume that they will all give the same directions when describing particular sacrifices. As with the sayings in Proverbs, the songs in Psalms and the many stories told among the Israelites, not all laws from ancient Israel are included in the Bible. The collecting and editing process selected for some laws and against others. And because the laws included in the Hebrew Bible come from different time periods and traditions, they do not exhibit complete uniformity. Although sacrificial laws may demand exact obedience to specified regulations, for example, variations of the same types of instructions appear in different books. The adjoining table provides several examples.

<p>Sin offering for congregation in Numbers</p> <p>“...the whole congregation shall offer one young bull for a burnt offering, a pleasing odor to the LORD, together with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the ordinance, and one male goat for a sin offering.” (15:24)</p>	<p>Sin offering for congregation in Leviticus</p> <p>“...the assembly shall offer a bull of the herd for a sin offering and bring it before the tent of meeting. The elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before the LORD, and the bull shall be slaughtered before the LORD.” (4:14–15)</p>
<p>Priestly portion in Deuteronomy</p> <p>“This shall be the priests’ due from the people, from those offering a sacrifice, whether an ox or a sheep: they shall give to the priest the shoulder, the two jowls, and the stomach.” (18:3)</p>	<p>Priestly portion in Leviticus</p> <p>“...the breast shall belong to Aaron and his sons. And the right thigh from your sacrifices of well-being you shall give to the priest as an offering.” (7:31–32)</p>

Such differences should alert us to the danger of imposing strict harmony on the biblical texts. Instead of seeking to determine how all the details of sacrificial regulations can match exactly, allow for variations within the larger tradition. Remember that the laws in Leviticus represent the end product of a very long process of development and collection. Also remember that sacrifices played an important role in Israelite society. They were not merely curiosities to be studied from a distance; they were part of the people’s religious experience.

Israelites would not have been shocked at the sight of a sheep’s throat being cut or the sounds of its final struggle for life. Slaughtering animals was part of their worship of God. Priests collecting blood and then pouring it against the sides of an altar where pieces of animals were being incinerated was considered commonplace. Furthermore, Israelites typically did not associate the sights, sounds and smells of animal sacrifice with cringing before an angry God—as a gory reminder of the seriousness of sin. Mostly they associated sacrifice with celebration.

There were, of course, times when people brought sacrifices to atone for their sins—and these were certainly serious occasions.

Unless you are a vegetarian, you eat animal flesh that was slaughtered for your consumption. The fact that you only see the meat packaged in a grocery store does not eliminate the fact that blood was shed. In ancient Israel, such killing of animals was not done at a packaging plant—it normally was part of a family’s sacrificial act acknowledging God’s provision. People in agricultural settings are accustomed to the whole process of butchering animals and preparing meat for later consumption. The difference is that most farmers and ranchers today do not butcher their animals at a worship center where they would give certain choice cuts of meat to a priest who assisted in the process. They do it on their own property. However, even today the butchering of an animal by a family usually is followed by a celebratory time, because the family often dines on choice cuts of meat immediately afterward.

Group Discussion

1. Do you believe that the sacrificial laws of Leviticus reveal important things about the character of God and human relationship with God, or do you believe that they merely help us to understand ancient Israelite beliefs? Why?
2. Do you view blood ritual with animal sacrifice as a primitive practice that modern people should condemn as barbaric, or do you believe that blood rituals have value? Why?
3. Many Jews and Christians today use hygienic explanations to justify the value of the kosher food laws in Deuteronomy 14 and Leviticus 11. They argue, for example, that God knew that improperly cooked pork causes trichinosis, so God prevented illness by forbidding Israelites from eating it. Evaluate this viewpoint in light of the fact that many people in other ancient Near Eastern cultures understood how to cook pork properly and ate it regularly.
4. What do you think of the Israelite prohibition of people with handicaps and deformities from serving as priests? Do you believe that those who serve God in formal capacities as rabbis, pastors and priests should be physically whole in order to be capable of performing ministry that is acceptable to God? Why or why not?

Glossary of Terms

Clean. Condition of being in a state of ritual purity—not simply physically washed.

Freewill Offerings/Offerings of Well Being. Celebratory sacrificial offerings brought to a priest in order to express a person’s gladness in the LORD.

Grain Offering. Sacrifices offered to God as a means of securing good will (Leviticus 2:1–16; 6:14–18).

Guilt Offering. Sacrifices resembling those for purification for unintentional sin offerings, except they also required restitution (Leviticus 5:14–6:7).

Holiness. In Leviticus, “holiness” describes a person or object that was set aside or consecrated for God. There were varying degrees of holiness (consecration to God). The term is not based on a concept of moral and ethical purity.

Holy of holies. The innermost shrine of the tabernacle, containing the Ark of the Covenant. Only the high priest could enter the holy of holies, and then only once a year.

Leviticus. Third book in the Hebrew Bible, The title in Hebrew is “And he called” from the first word of the book in the Hebrew text. The title in the Septuagint is *Leuiticon*, which means “The Levitical Book.” The Vulgate converts this Greek heading into the Latin *Liber Leviticus*, “The Book of Leviticus,” which provides the basis for the English title.

Peace Offerings. Sacrifices associated with celebrations in response to blessings received from God (Leviticus 3:1–17; 7:11–21, 28–36). Three basic types: (1) Thanksgiving Offerings—made to thank God for blessings; (2) Vow Offerings—made to fulfill vows to God; (3) Freewill Offerings—made to express gladness in the LORD.

Ritual purity. The condition of holiness required of priests who ministered before the LORD. They also had to be without physical blemishes in order not to degrade the holy place. Common people needed to be in a state of ritual purity in order to approach the holy place to bring sacrifices.

Tabernacle. A portable shrine described in Exodus that provided the worship center for the Israelites during their sojourn in the wilderness. Also called the “tent of meeting.”

Thanksgiving Offerings. A kind of peace offering made to thank God for particular blessings.

Unclean. Ritually defiled, for any number of reasons (for example, menstruation or other bodily discharges, coming into contact with a corpse, having certain diseases), making the person unfit to approach the holy place or to interact with others in the community who were clean.

Unintentional Sin Offering. Sacrifices for purification following specific, unintentional sins. Animals required for these offerings differed according to the importance in society of the person who sinned (Leviticus 4:1–5:13; 6:24–30).

Vow Offerings. A kind of peace offering made to fulfill vows/promises made to God.

Whole Burnt Offering. Sacrifice in which the entire animal (except for the skin) was burnt to ashes (Leviticus 1:3–17; 6:8–13). The Septuagint translates the Hebrew word for this sacrifice with the Greek word “holocaust” (“whole burnt offering”).

Further Reading on Sacrifices

Anderson, Gary A. “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings.” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5. Edited by D. N. Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992, pages 870–886. Lengthy article with valuable information.

Anderson, G. A. *Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel: Studies in their Social and Political Importance*. Harvard Semitic Monographs, vol. 41. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987. A published dissertation—therefore academic. Good source for research.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966. Important study advancing the theory that purity laws help a society define what is proper and improper in the world. With respect to kosher

food laws, for example, if fish should have fins and scales, then people should not eat aquatic animals that do not have fins and scales—they are unclean. Scholarly work.

Gerstenberger, Erhard S. *Leviticus: A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. (450 pages). Fairly accessible information.

Hartley, John E. *Leviticus*. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas, Word, 1992. Thorough work from a fairly conservative perspective. Deals with theological themes and applies text to modern issues of worship and holy living (496 pages).

Milgrom, Joseph. *Cult and Conscience*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976. Technical work for research.

Milgrom, Jacob. *Leviticus*. 2 volumes. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1991, 2000. Exhaustive and technical work by a Jewish scholar. Written for scholars. Good for research but not an easy read (1892 pages).