

LEVITICUS

Name and Setting: *Leviticus* is at the center of the Pentateuch- the 3rd of the first 5 books of the Bible. It centers the faith community on the worship of God and summons them to holiness, righteousness, and justice.

Leviticus means “about or relating to Levites.” (Levi was 1 of Jacob’s 12 sons; hence, the Levites were one of the tribes of Israel. The book is so named even though the Levites are only mentioned once in the book. (Lev.25).

Leviticus sometimes is called “*Torat Kohanim*” = “Instructions to Priests,” or “Priests Manual” because of its heavy focus on priests, their duties, and the Jews’ religious regulations. In *Leviticus*, God established the ordination ritual for Israel’s High Priest, the first of whom was Aaron, older brother of Moses and Miriam. Aaron’s eldest surviving son succeeded him. Thereafter, the first born of each High Priest was to be consecrated to that role. Other males in Aaron’s family and their descendants also were priests/*Kohanim*.

All other descendants of Levi (the Levites/*L’vi’im*) worked as associates/assistants to the priest - maintaining the worship center (Tabernacle, then Temple), acting as teachers, musicians, police/guards, and judges, helping with sacrifices, and performing other religious duties, e.g., the Levitical family of Asaph wrote and performed much of the worship music. **(See: Levitical Genealogy.)**

Writer and Date: Tradition ascribes the first 5 books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) to Moses and *Leviticus* is presented as God’s instructions to Moses. Repeatedly throughout the book appears the phrase, “God told Moses...” or “The Lord said to Moses.” But most scholars today believe the contents of the first 5 books passed from generation to generation orally, and for the most part, were not written until many centuries later (probably during and after the Babylonian Exile). Nonetheless, *Leviticus* unequivocally indicates that the material contained therein is an accurate declaration of what the Lord told Moses.

The book is set at the foot of Mt. Sinai (in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula) where God gave Moses the Law and instructions to build a Tabernacle. This may have occurred between the 1400s-1200s BC. (But scholars disagree on these dates.) At Sinai, Israel entered a covenant relationship, with God, which resembled those

between small nations and great kings of the day. God gave Israel His Law and promised to give the people a land of milk and honey, and Israel promised to obey the Law and to worship God alone.

The Tabernacle had just been finished and God had come to dwell in it. Now, the people were anxious to set out on their journey to the Promised Land. But first, God had instructions for them about how they must live as His people with Him in their midst.

Themes: Gods' primary admonition in *Leviticus* is, "You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy." (Lev.19:2). God required a greater degree of morality and holiness from Israel than other peoples in that day. So, God gave His people detailed regulations and rituals for life and worship. *Leviticus* contains many of the laws, rituals and regulations given by God at Sinai. For the most part, they were administered by priests.

Underlying this theme is God's presence within the community by His presence in the Tabernacle/Tent of Meeting. Israel had to protect the Tabernacle from defilement because it was God's special abode. Continuing defilement could lead to God abandon the Tabernacle and His people.

Another *Leviticus* theme is its recognition that God's creation and intentional design of the world were very good. Worship is the primary means to reclaim and sustain God's intention for the world. When God's order continues, everything prospers, but when God's order is disturbed, chaos erupts and the harmony between God and the world is broken. Human observance of God's ritual order enables a holy God to dwell in this world. When His people faithfully follow God's rituals and commands, they can experience His presence. If they are unfaithful to those rituals and commands, the harmony between God and the world is disturbed.

Leviticus also emphasizes Israel's capacity to sanctify the world through its commitment to justice. The Holiness Code, the center of which is God's command to love one's neighbor as oneself, has much to say about the need to care for the land, the poor, and the foreigner. God's repeated exhortations to work for justice and righteousness and to hold the land in trust as a gift are an enduring admonition to all God's people.

Narratives and Speeches of God: *Leviticus* contains 36 speeches by God (3 x 12), including the appendix, Chp.27, which may have been added to arrive at the liturgical number of those speeches. In 31 of the speeches, the Lord spoke only to Moses, who then declared God's message to the people. 4 times, God spoke to both Moses and Aaron, and once He spoke solely to Aaron. In short, almost the whole book consists of divine speech, as repeated to the people by Moses and Aaron. Hence, *Leviticus* is presented as the Word of God with absolute, unchallengeable, and divine authority.

The book has one primary narrative, which is in chapter 10. It deals with the death of Aaron's eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, who burned incense before the Lord without authorization, and therefore, were consumed by the Lord's fire (measure for measure- fire for fire). Another short narrative in Chp.24 deals with a blasphemer (son of a Jewish mother and Egyptian father) whom God ordered Moses to put to death. Both underscore the importance God places on holiness and strict adherence to His Law and the dire consequence of sin.

Structure of Leviticus: The book contains 7 chapters on Israel's ancient sacrificial system and 5 chapters about ritual impurity. Much of *Leviticus* relates to rituals:

Chapters 1-7=	Sacrifices,
Chapters 8-10=	Priestly ordination,
Chapters 11-17=	Ceremonial purity laws,
Chapters 18-27=	Standards for God's Holy People, including commands for daily life, appointed feasts and convocations, sabbatical year and year of jubilee, rewards for obedience and punishment for disobedience, vows, and devoted things.

Leviticus is Difficult for Today's Christians to Read: Christians today may consider *Leviticus* a tedious, anachronistic rule book written for ancient Jewish priests, who have been superseded by Christ. Protestants, especially, can be wary of priests and ritual; however, although God no longer lives in a Tabernacle or a Temple and all believers are priests indwelt by the Holy Spirit, God still wants His people to be holy.

Beyond that, although the first 10 chapters appear to be addressed to priests, laity plays a vital part in the sacrificial system. Also, Chapters 17-27, the "Holiness Code," is addressed to the laity and the extensive regulations in it encompass even the most personal aspects of life, underscoring God's command that holiness applies to every aspect of life: food, sex, ethics, family, and land, as well as worship, sacrifices and holidays. Hence, although *Leviticus* appears facially to be addressed to ancient priests, it has much to say to lay people then and now,

Sacrificial System: Like many ancient peoples, Israel's most important religious rituals involved sacrifices, generally of animals but also of grain/bread and wine. Unlike other contemporary cultures, however, the Israelites did not consider their sacrifices to be food for God. He is the Creator. Israel's God did not need people to feed Him; the reverse is true. God feeds His people.

Other ancient Near East religions often featured places for the gods' earthly homes. Some had beds, chairs, and tables set with lavish food and drink. The Mesopotamian (Iran) ziggurats were considered earthly homes for the gods and worshippers left them daily food and drink (which the priests ate). And See: Dan. 14:1-22- *Bel and the Dragon (Apocryphal Addition)*. Persian King Cyrus worshipped Bel. He believed Bel ate the food and drink people offered him each night. Daniel challenged that belief. Bel's priests set out food and drink in his temple and then sealed the door overnight. But the priests had a secret door to enter the temple and take the food and drink. The next day, the food was gone even though the seal was intact, but Daniel pointed to footprints on the floor and showed Cyrus the secret door the priests had been using. Cyrus executed the priests.

From the beginning God decreed that human life depended on having a relationship with Him; hence, the result of sin is death because it breaks that relationship. When humans sinned, death came into the world, but in His love, God established a system which substituted animal sacrifice for human death. In other words, God agreed the death of animals would be the means of atonement, purification, and forgiveness for human sin so that the relationship between holy God and His people could be restored.

Synopsis: The first part of *Leviticus* focuses on sacrifices, priests, and religious rituals. The balance of the book deals with the daily behavior and holy living required for all Jews. The laws/regulations in *Leviticus* were intended to make Israel holy enough to worship God. So, God created a blueprint for living a

holy life. He did not expect Israelites to be perfect, but He did require them to be obedient and to worship Him only.

As *Exodus* closed, the Tabernacle had been finished, and God had descended on it and filled the Tabernacle. But the people were confronted with their own unworthiness. It was difficult enough when God was on the mountain with thunder and lightning, but now, He was in their midst. The presence of a holy God among unholy people presented a problem. How could they go forward?

Chp.1-7: Worship could not wait until the Promised Land. The descent of God's glory on the Tabernacle inspired the need for immediate worship and sacrifice. So, God established the rituals for worship and offerings/sacrifices. [Note: The Pentateuch dedicates more time to worship/sacrifice than it does to creation because these are offerings, including their minutiae, were critically important to the ongoing relationship between God and His people.] **(See Regulations Concerning Offerings.)**

[Even though this is tedious reading and *Leviticus* often daunts even the most diligent student, a few clues may help the reader tackle the material.]

The Jewish word for offering is *korban*, which meant to “come close” or “draw near.” That was the historic Jewish understanding of what an offering was, opportunity to draw near to God. These offerings were distinct from and in addition to, the mandatory tithe, which merely provided for the care and sustenance of the priests, Levites, and worship center.

Lev.1:3-6:7 deals with the **5 major offerings from the donor's perspective**. Those offerings are the burnt, cereal, well-being, purification, and reparation offerings. The first 3 of those offerings were voluntary; the last 2 were required.

The second series, Lev.6:8-7:36 refers to the **same offerings, but from the priests' perspective**. The instructions to the priests were very detailed, including even the cleaning of used vessels (earthenware must be broken; bronze vessels = scoured.) All the instructions were part of God's revelation to Moses. (Lev.1:1) and God required scrupulous, detailed observance even of the minutiae.

The **voluntary sacrifices** were **gifts to God- a joyful response to God's goodness**. The sacrifice was made solely from the desire of a grateful person to please God; it was extravagant. (In a subsistence-level, agrarian community, the

gift of an unblemished cow, goat, or lamb represented a donation of a major part of one's worth.) These sacrifices were not considered a duty- they were voluntary, joyful, and spontaneous, not grudging. They allowed an ordinary person to draw nearer to the most holy God. Although these offerings were not about sin *per se*, they also provided atonement for the worshipper. (1:4). *Leviticus* was concerned with one's relationship to God and these selfless gifts restored that relationship.

Voluntary burnt offering: The worshipper brought the designated unblemished animal to the center of the community, the door of the Tent of Meeting/Tabernacle- the intersection between God and His people. He put his hands on the animal's head (symbolically passing his sin to the animal) and slaughtered it (cut its throat) in the outer court facing toward the Tabernacle/ God where he drained its blood and gave it to the priest who sprinkled that blood on the altar.

The donor then skinned, quartered the animal's body. [If the sacrifice was a bird, the ritual was slightly different because of its different anatomy.] The priest stoked the fire and arranged the wood on which to place the animal's parts as the donor washed the entrails and legs to remove any uncleanness. Then, he handed the parts to the priest, who burned it on the altar. Burning literally meant "turned to smoke" -it was a pleasing odor to God. The whole offering was burned except the hide, which was given to the priest.

Voluntary cereal offering: This offering which often was coupled with the burnt or well-being offering, involved 3 steps: preparation, presentation and burning. The donor handled the first 2 parts; priest burned a portion of the offering and kept the rest.

Voluntary well-being offering: The ritual here was much like that for the burnt offering, except that with the well-being offering, the best parts of the animal were given to God and the rest were shared among the priest, the donor, and his family/friends often in a common meal in the Tabernacle courtyard.

Mandatory purification offering: The next 2 offerings were required to deal with sin. The purification offering was for unintentional violation of God's commandments because it disrupted the relationship between the worshipper

and God. The sacrifice resulted in 2 things: forgiveness of the sinner/worshipper and purification of the Tabernacle, which also was defiled by that sin.

The priest who offered the sacrifice had to eat it that day (or the next) in a holy place, the courtyard of the Tabernacle. The priest symbolized holiness, so he nullified the sin by consuming the sacrifice. (Holiness swallowed impurity/life defeated death.) Any male in the priest's family could eat it, but anything brought into the Tabernacle to make atonement could not be eaten; it had to be burned.

Today, sin often is treated casually, but in *Leviticus* sin was very serious. Plus, in American society, especially in the age of COVID, life is so individualistic that the sense of community sometimes is lost. Today, people can forget that their actions affect the larger community. In ancient times, Israelites understood that sin disrupted more than their own relationship with God. Indeed, sin was thought to leave its mark on people, places, and institutions. Sin was not abstract; it was corrosive, like acid or a pollutant discharged into the atmosphere which spread its corruption even on the sacred, including the Tabernacle, God's earthly residence. Because of that, the purification offering was made to cleanse both the person and the Tabernacle.

One author suggested that "life without consciousness of sin's burden is pointless narcissism posing as success and happiness." (Balentine, *Interpretation*). In priestly theology, sin's corruption was not limited to the sinner. It was like a virus that attacked the world and broke down society and institutions. Sins of the faith community corrupted God's sanctuary and threatened to cause Him to depart from the world.

Sin was multifaceted: omission/commission, unintentional/ intentional. A person's unintentional sin affected more than the sinner. It also polluted the Tabernacle courtyard and outer altar; therefore, the blood of the purification offering was daubed on the sides of the altar of sacrifice in the Tabernacle courtyard. If the community or high priest sinned, that stain reached into the inner sanctuary (Holy Place), so the blood had to be sprinkled 7 times on the incense altar in the Holy Place and before the veil into the Holy of Holies. If the sin was intentional and unrepented, it was the most severe. It defiled everything, even into the Holy of Holies. That sin only could be cleansed at *Yom Kippur*.

Mandatory reparation/guilt offering: This offering was made in expiation for certain unintentional sins. The ritual was much like the purification offering, with one addition, it also required a concrete act of justice= **reparation**. These offerings required the sinner first to confess and repent, and then to sacrifice and reimburse the person who was wronged for the value of the thing/person injured + 20% (twice the tithe amount). Two types of sins requiring reparations are specifically mentioned: breach of the “holy things of the Lord” (not defined) and violation of another person.

The objective of both the purification and reparation offerings was forgiveness for the sinner and cleansing of the sanctuary. Symbolically, by placing blood on the contaminated part of the sanctuary, it could be cleansed, and a holy God would remain there. Once cleansed, it again could be the center of radiating holiness. God’s forgiveness superseded the sin.

The 1st 5 chapters of *Leviticus* detail the 5 offerings, from the donor’s side. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the same offerings from the priest’s viewpoint. A lot of duplication exists. The sacrifices are listed in descending order of holiness: most holy= burnt, cereal, purification, reparation; holy= well-being. With the most holy sacrifices the parts of the sacrifice to be consumed are eaten only by priests in a holy place. Holy sacrifices can be eaten outside the sanctuary by the priest, the donor, and his family/friends in the Tabernacle courtyard.

God commanded the priests to keep the fire on the altar of sacrifice perpetually burning; it never could be allowed to go out, even while Israel was travelling in the Wilderness. The fire was a sign of God’s continuing presence with and availability to the people. God would be in unbroken communion with His people. Every morning, the priests had to add wood to the fire and arrange the burnt and fellowship offerings on it. (God even specified how the priests were to dispose of the ashes from the altar and what the priests were to wear.) These continuous voluntary offerings anchored Israel’s life in God by regular worship.

Chp.8, 9: Having established procedures for sacrifices, God turned to rituals and procedures for anointing Aaron as High Priest and for consecrating/ordaining his sons as priests. [Note: Messiah means “anointed one.”] As animals were set apart for sacrifice, so were a group of God’s people set aside to offer sacrifices. They were to wear special clothes and be consecrated as a tangible

symbol of having been set apart. (The Tabernacle also was anointed.) The ordination ceremony in *Leviticus* was substantially like that described in Ex.29. Only Aaron, the High Priest, was anointed (later, kings also were anointed); Aaron's sons were consecrated/ordained.

Lev.8 implements God's vision for the priesthood after the Tabernacle was built and sacrifices were specified and detailed. God's hope and expectation of a priestly kingdom and holy nation was ready to be realized. This was a new start and a new way for God to be with His people—like the beginning of the cosmos.

The Lord instructed Moses to ordain Aaron and his sons. Ordination involved sacrificing a bull and 2 rams and presenting a basket of unleavened bread at the entrance of the Tabernacle with all the people gathered there to see. Aaron and his sons had to wash and be clothed in official robes. Then, Moses anointed the Tabernacle and everything in it, thereby consecrating them. He then sprinkled some of the oil on the altar and its utensils. Finally, he poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head.

Aaron and his sons placed their hands on the head of the bull, and Moses slaughtered it, acting as priest at God's command, though he was not a priest generally. He sprinkled oil and some of the bull's blood on Aaron and his sons and poured the rest at the base of the altar to make atonement for it. He followed a similar procedure with the rams. This ritual bound the priests to their new place of service in the sanctuary and at the altar.

Finally, Moses put some of the ram's blood on the lobes of the right ears of Aaron and his sons, the thumbs of their right hands, and the big toes of their right feet. [This ritual occurs only here and for purification of a person with a skin condition.] Blood represents life. By placing it on the person's extremities, his whole body was deemed purified. Aaron and his sons now were clean/holy.

Aaron and his sons were instructed to eat the meat from the sacrifices at the entrance to the Tabernacle, and they were forbidden from leaving for 7 days. [Note: 7 days was required for creation and God was creating a new, holy thing here. If they had gone home, they would have risked contact with uncleanness.]

Aaron and his sons had attained a new status. They were holy, and they had a new relationship to the people. The requirement to stay at the Tabernacle for 7 days reflected their transition from common to holy- a parallel with creation.

On the 8th day, Moses called Aaron, his sons, and Israel's elders to the Tabernacle. He told Aaron to make certain sacrifices for himself and for the people in front of the Tabernacle. After Aaron completed the sacrifices, he lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them. Then he and Moses went into the Tabernacle (perhaps to pray). When they came out, the glory of the Lord appeared to the people. Fire came out from God and consumed the offerings causing the people to shout for joy and fall on their faces.

Chp.10: Almost immediately thereafter this dramatic moment on the 8th day, unholy behavior occurred. (Great holy moments often are followed by great sin. After Creation or as Moses received the 10 Commandments, sin arose.)

Following Israel's first formal worship, things fell apart, and it involved priestly misconduct. Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's, 2 oldest sons, engaged in a behavior not explicitly commanded by God. They offered "unauthorized fire" before the Lord (not more definitively described.) Immediately after they did so, they were killed by fire from the Lord (fire for fire/measure for measure). With the privilege of unique access to the divine, priests had special status and responsibilities. This was a stern warning to consecrated priests (and elders).

Moses called, Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Aaron's uncle, to carry out the bodies by their tunics to avoid defilement from touching their corpses. Aaron and his living sons were forbidden to mourn Nadab and Abihu, but other family members and the people of Israel could mourn them. The Lord then told Aaron that when he or his remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, were in the Tabernacle, they always must be well groomed (hair combed and clothes tidy) and they could not drink wine or spirits. [This was the Lord's only direct speech to Aaron alone.]

Chp.11-15: Having established the rules for the life of the sanctuary at Israel's center, it was time to establish rules for life in everyday Israelite society. God again set forth the clean and unclean animals and the Kosher dietary laws (*kashrut*). (See also Gen.7:2).

These chapters deal with purification of women after childbirth. [The need for purification was not about childbirth *per se* but from the blood attendant thereto. If a boy was born, the mother had to separate for 40 days; if it was a girl, she had to separate for 80 days. No reason is given for the distinction.]

The laws about clean/unclean also deal with various skin diseases, all of which were called “leprosy,” though most commentators say they were not about Hansen’s Disease, which now is known as leprosy. These “diseases” included mold and mildew in homes, buildings, objects, or clothes rendering them unclean.

Finally, chapter 15 contains an elaborate recitation about how a person could become ceremonially unclean and provides the extensive ritual by which one could become clean again.

Chp.16: The entire chapter focuses on the most solemn day of each Jewish year, *Yom Kippur*/Day of Atonement. It is celebrated on 10 Tishri, the 7th month. It is a day of self-denial, fasting, and repentance for the people of Israel. It also was the only day of the year when anyone could enter the Holy of Holies and then it only was the High Priest, who sacrificed for himself, his family, and the people. God detailed specific rituals to be observed on that day, including identification of a “scapegoat” which was banished into the Wilderness ceremonially carrying with him the sin of the people and the sacrifice of another goat with its blood being placed in the Holy of Holies for the sins of the people that year. [*Yom Kippur* foreshadowed Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice for the sin of the world as discussed in the NT book of *Hebrews*.]

Chp.17- The “Holiness Code”: The Code reflects God’s desire to claim all of life for Himself. No distinction should exist between worship and work, Israelite and resident alien; however, the dos and don’ts of the Holiness Code can become legalism if they are not paired with a relationship with God.

Here holiness relates to the community, as opposed to holiness associated with the sanctuary and priests. The chapter ties back to Chp.1-7 and the manner for making sacrifices. It mandates that sacrifices must only be made to God (YHWH), not to other “gods.”

The people of Israel knew their animals. The worshipper, not the priest, slaughtered his own animal after placing his hands on its head. The worshipper had to drain the animal's blood, which symbolized its life. (**Lev.17: 11 declares the life is in the blood.**) Blood was the agent of God's atonement.

Because the animal's blood was the animating force of life, Jews were prohibited from eating/drinking blood. Even today, orthodox Jews eat only kosher meat slaughtered in accordance with strict regulations under rabbinic supervision to ensure all the blood has been drained from the meat.

Finally, the worshipper presented the animal's body to the priest, who offered it to God. All animals were to be butchered at the Tabernacle. No one ever forgot where meat came from, and they never gave thanks to Publix or Berns. The process created greater appreciation for the sanctity of life. No matter where one was, the animal first was brought to the Tabernacle, slaughtered, and given to God. Later, some of the meat might become the worshipper's sanctified meal. For example, with the sacrifice of well-being, the best parts were offered to God first, then the rest was given to the priest and worshipper.

The rule was modified as people were spread out on the march and could not always go to the Tabernacle for every meal. Nonetheless, the first born always had to be offered at the Tabernacle. In this way, people maintained their respect for life and never forgot whose hand provided them food.

Chp.18: As part of being holy Israelites were prohibited from participating in various Canaanite sexual practices which the Lord labeled "abominations."

Chp.19, 20: The focus on the life of holiness included ritual and moral holiness; indeed, all aspects of life were to be holy= holy sanctuary/holy people. These chapters expand and rephrase the original commandments and seem to repeat them in reverse order. They are greater than do no harm; they challenge God's people to love and do justice. The only way to demonstrate God's love was to live it out in Israel's life; hence, Chapter 19 includes **the command to love your neighbor as yourself. (Lev.19:18)**. As God was bounteous and merciful to His people, so they should be to one another.

These chapters also contain the book's key admonition: "The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 'You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.'" (*Imitatio Dei*.) (Lev.19:2). God desired extravagant worship in the sanctuary and overflowing justice and righteousness outside it.

Chapters 19 and 20 also contain a variety of laws concerning the Sabbath, sorcery, sexual practices, capital punishment, and kindness to strangers. The breadth of the laws confirms God's interest in every aspect of the lives of His people. For example, Israel was told to leave part of the harvest for the poor to glean (See: *Ruth*). Later rabbis opined that part should equal 1/60th of the crop. But God also allowed polygamy, concubinage, divorce, and slavery, with restrictions, e.g., no Israelite could be a slave forever.

Because God had spared the first born of Israel from the last plague in Egypt (Ex.11:4-12:13), all first born sons and animals in Israel belonged to God. First born animals were sacrificed; first born sons were redeemed by paying a price instead of giving the child over to temple service. God specifically prohibited child sacrifice among the Jews. (Lev.20:2-5).

Chapter 20 also contains penalties for violations of the Holiness Code. Capital punishment was decreed for those who sacrificed their children to Molech. Penalties also were provided for worship of other gods, necromancy (magic) and various sexual violations.

Chp.21, 22: The holiness requirements for priests and offerings/sacrifices, were more stringent than for the ordinary people. Purity, both actual and ceremonial, was strictly enforced. Sacrificial animals had to meet detailed standards to be acceptable to God- at least 8 days old and unblemished.

Because priests labored in the Holy Place (and the High Priest annually entered the Holy of Holies), no priest was allowed to function in the Tent of Meeting or even to eat the sacrificial meals if he was ceremonially unclean. Priests had to marry virgins because their sons would become priests. Priests also could have no physical defects and they could not touch a dead body, except for the most immediate family members- even then, the priest could not function in the Tabernacle until he was restored to cleanness. (No funeral ever would have been held in the sanctuary. It would have defiled the premises.)

Priests attained their status by birth; they did not earn it. The priesthood was not a meritocracy; it was based on God's selection. But they maintained their status by not doing certain things. The priestly requirements were designed to assure priests would be totally loyal to God.

Chp.23 -God's Holy Days: The most recurring and unique Jewish festival was the weekly sabbath, which memorialized God's rest after creation. Jewish Sabbath rest was unique in the ancient world. From sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, Jews were required to abstain from work of all kinds, as God had rested from His labors in creation on the 7th day. Over time, God's requirement for a weekly day of rest became the focal point for ever-increasing Jewish legalism and the purpose of the day sometimes became lost in the technicalities.

Time is a non-renewable resource and God's demand for a day of rest was radical. By setting aside 1 day in 7, people were trained to view all time as set apart for God and to provide a testimony to their faith that He would provide.

God also established annual "appointed times to celebrate" = holy days/ festivals throughout the year to keep Israel focused on Him. (**See Annual Jewish Festivals**).

Passover was the first annual festival. It was observed each spring in the first month of the Jews' agricultural year (*Nisan*) to remember God's miraculous deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. [Jesus transformed Passover into the Lord's Supper revealing that God was doing something new in the lives of God's people- delivering them from slavery to sin.]

Passover was followed by the 7-day **Festival of Unleavened Bread** which immediately followed Passover.

Among the spring holidays was the **Festival of First Fruits/Feast of Weeks**, marking the barley harvest and considered the "first day of spring," the beginning of the Jewish year. The festival was observed 2 days after Passover- the 1st day of Unleavened Bread. On that day, Israelites brought the first of their barley harvest to God. No barley could be consumed or sold until after the "first fruits" were presented to God.

50 days (7 weeks) after the barley harvest, the Jews celebrated **Pentecost** in thanksgiving for the wheat harvest. Later, this festival also remembered the giving of the Law to Moses 50 days after the first Passover.

In the 7th month (*Tishri*), 3 fall festivals were celebrated. First, came the **Feast of Trumpets/Rosh HaShana**, which later was considered the first day of the spiritual year. It was marked by a blast from a ram's horn. Although each month began with a new moon festival and a trumpet blast, this festival was particularly important because it began a time of introspection and repentance culminating in the most holy day of the year, **Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement**. (See Chp.16).

Finally, 19 days after *Rosh HaShana*, was the 8-day **Festival of Booths/Tabernacle, Sukkot**. It was the only fall festival of joy when the Jewish people gave thanks for the grape and olive harvests, waved branches, and lived in booths, remembering the wanderings of the children of Israel in the Wilderness.

Together the sabbaths, new moons, and annual feasts total 70 days each year (20%) set aside to God. This was a radical testimony by subsistence farmers to their dedication to Him.

Chp.24: How were the people to know God still was with them. The lamp in the Tabernacle Holy Place was never to go out, even when Israel was on the move. It reminded Israel that God's first act in creation was light. Hanukkah celebrates God's miraculous intervention to keep the lamp burning after the Temple was cleansed of the defilement from the abominations of evil Persian king Antiochus Epiphanes even though the Jews only had enough oil for one day. The lamps burned for 8 days and nights. (*1 and 2 Maccabees*).

The chapter also contains another short narrative- the story of a man (son of an Israelite mother and Egyptian father) who fought an Israelite and then spoke God's name in a curse. Moses asked God what to do with him. God said he must be taken out of the camp and stoned. Because all who heard the blasphemy had been polluted, they all must lay their hands on his head to return the sin to the sinner. Then, they were to stone him to death outside the camp. Thus, the punishment for blasphemy- death by stoning- was established. People learned

that words could be deadly weapons. (In Scripture, sin seldom is individual; it ripples into the community.)

Lev.24:19-21: In the Jewish system punishment focused on restitution, not revenge. God limited punishment, e.g., the well-known **eye for an eye** axion decreed proportional punishment, not revenge, should be the standard for Israel. Whether this admonition was followed in Israel is uncertain.

The chapter also provides for the 12 loaves, the “Bread of the Presence” (equal to the 12 tribes of Israel), placed on a table in the Holy Place each week. The bread was a symbol of God’s presence with His people. (And Jesus, in His Last Supper said the bread was His body broken for many.) The bread was to be eaten only by priests at the end of each week when new bread was brought. [But see: David received this bread to feed his men from the priest, Ahimelech, in contravention to this command.]

Chp.25 - Sabbath and Jubilee Years: Originally these laws were given to Moses at Sinai. The Sabbath Year was premised on recognition that God was the owner of the land; the Israelites were to be His tenants. These Sabbaths provided rest for the land every 7th year. No sowing, reaping, harvesting, or pruning was to occur during Sabbath years, but Israelites could eat what came up naturally from the fields. Like the double dose of manna God gave on the 6th day, He promised to provide enough in the 6th year to take people through the 7th, but this required radical trust. Relying on God for everything 1 year out of 7 involved much more trust than relying on Him 1 day out of 7.

In the Sabbath Year, all Jewish debt was to be forgiven also.

The Jubilee Year was designed to assure that no Jewish person could be enslaved permanently, and no Jewish land could be sold in perpetuity. The person/land had to be redeemed/returned to the original owner at least within 50 years. The purchase price dropped depending on when within the 50-year cycle the sale occurred. The next of kin could redeem the property/person at any time or they could wait until the Jubilee year when they automatically would be returned. Exceptions to these rules included land within a walled city, which could be sold in perpetuity, and Levites, who had a perpetual right of redemption and even had a right to redeem property in a walled city within 1 year.

Beyond that, although the Law did not forbid slavery, it did mandate that all Jewish masters must treat their Jewish slaves kindly and required Jews to take care of their kin and not lend to other Jews at interest.

It is doubtful whether the Israelites ever fully observed the Jubilee or Sabbath Years.

Chp.26: Here, 3 themes predominate: avoiding idolatry, observing Sabbath, and revering the sanctuary (the place of God's presence). God set forth a series of promises and warnings about rewards for obedience and punishments for disobedience of His laws. Blessings and curses were standard in the ancient Near East. But here God also promised that if the disobedient person repented and turned back to God, He would bless them.

This probably was the end of the original book of *Leviticus*.

Chp.27 Vows and Oaths (Appendix): This chapter may have been added to have a total of 36 divine speeches. It deals with things dedicated to God, e.g., land, homes, people, and the prices to redeem them. A person could vow to dedicate a person/thing, but generally that person/thing could be redeemed for a price.

Most importantly, God declared that He was to come first in everything, but God also recognized human nature is to disobey. So, God promised to respond favorably to true repentance provided sacrificial rituals designed to restore the relationship between the people and Himself. [Ultimately, God became a man, Jesus, who made the once-for-all sacrifice for human sin so that mankind could have life and an eternal relationship with Him.]