

THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

CULTURAL INSIGHT

The book of Leviticus is the third book in the Old Testament and Hebrew Bible. Its name in English comes from ancient Greek through Latin and derives from Levi, the ancient priestly tribe. In Hebrew, the name of the book is *vayiqra*, from the book's first words: "And he [meaning Jehovah] called to Moses" (Leviticus 1:1). The book of Leviticus describes a detailed sacrificial system, includes laws for establishing and regulating the priesthood, details rules for purity and impurity, and contains laws for making Israel into a holy people. Many of the laws that modern Latter-day Saints associate with the law of Moses are found in Leviticus. The book is framed as a series of commands that Jehovah gives to Moses and that he in turn gives to Israel.

Leviticus is divided into six main sections of varying lengths. Leviticus 1–7 contains the Israelite sacrificial system. It regulates the procedures and animals for each of the different sacrifices. Leviticus 8–10 describes the establishment of the priesthood given to Aaron, including a narrative about how Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu were killed for offering "strange fire" (Leviticus 10:1–5). Leviticus 11–15 lays out the laws for differentiating the various states of ritual purity. This includes laws about animals (which laws became the basis for Jewish kosher laws), disease, and childbirth. Leviticus 16 is about ceremonies and rituals that surrounded the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 17–27 is often called the Holiness Code, as it contains sundry commandments designed to help Israel sanctify themselves and become a holy people.

Although it can sometimes be difficult for us modern members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to understand the need for having Leviticus in our scriptures, in many ways it is something like the Church's handbook for those living under the law of Moses, which is sometimes thought of as a temporal law. Doctrine and Covenant 29:34 reminds us that the Lord never actually gave a commandment that was

only temporal; thus, all the commandments in Leviticus have a spiritual purpose. As an example of the intriguing potential in studying this aspect of Leviticus, it is worth noting that in our standard works, the word *atonement* (with its variants) appears more times in the book of Leviticus than in the New Testament, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price combined.

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