

INTRODUCTION TO LEVITICUS

by

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Note: Author's introduction in *A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus, Expository and Practical* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

THE NATURE OF THE BOOK

There is no book, in the whole compass of that inspired Volume which the Holy Ghost has given us, that contains more of the very words of God than *Leviticus*. It is God that is the direct speaker in almost every page; his gracious words are recorded in the form wherein they were uttered. This consideration cannot fail to send us to the study of it with singular interest and attention.

It has been called "*Leviticus*" because its typical institutions, in all their variety, were committed to the care of *the tribe of Levi*, or to the priests who were of that tribe. The Greek translators of the Pentateuch devised that name. The Talmud, for similar reasons, calls it תּוֹרַת הַכֹּהֲנִים , "the law of the priests." But Jewish writers in general are content with a simpler title; they take the first words of the book as the name, calling it וַיִּקְרָא , "Vayikra," q.d., the book that begins with the words, "And the Lord called."

It carries within itself the seal of its Divine Origin. As an internal proof of its author being Divine, some have been content to allege the prophecy contained in chap. 26, the fulfilment of which is spread before the eyes of all the earth. But if, in addition to this, we find every chapter throughout presenting views of doctrine and practice that exactly dovetail into the unfigurative statements of the New Testament, surely we shall then acknowledge that it bears the impress of the Divine mind from beginning to end.

The Gospel of the grace of God, with all that follows in its train, may be found in *Leviticus*. This is the glorious attraction of the book to every reader who feels himself a sinner. The New Testament has about forty references to its various ordinances.

The rites here detailed were typical, and every type was designed and intended by God to bear resemblance to some spiritual truth. The likeness between type and antitype is never accidental. The very excellency of these rites consists in their being chosen by God for the end of shadowing forth "good things to come" (Heb. 10:1). As it is not a mere accidental resemblance to the Lord's body and blood that obtains in the bread and wine used in the Lord's supper, but on the contrary a likeness that made the symbols suitable to be selected for that end, so is it in the case of every Levitical type. Much of our satisfaction and edification in tracing the correspondence between type and antitype will depend on the firmness with which we hold this principle.

If it be asked why a typical mode of showing forth truth was adopted to such an extent in those

early days, it may be difficult to give a precise answer. It is plain such a method of instruction may answer many purposes. It may not only meet the end of simplifying the truth, it may also open the mind to comprehend more, while it deepens present impressions of things known. The existence of a type does not always argue that the thing typified is obscurely seen or imperfectly known. On the contrary, there was a type in the Garden of Eden--the tree of life,--while life in all its meaning was fully comprehended by Adam. In all probability there will be typical objects in the millennial age, for there is to be a river which shall flow from Jerusalem to water the valley of Shittim (Joel 3:18), the same of which Ezekiel (47:1) and Zechariah (14:8) speak. This river is said to be for the healing of the Dead Sea, while on its banks grow majestic trees whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. No doubt a spiritual significance lies hid in these visible signs. The visible symbol seems to be a broad seal and sign of the peculiar truth manifested in these days, viz., the overflowing stream of the Holy Spirit (who shall be poured out at Jerusalem on the house of David first), winding its course over earth to convey saving health to all nations.

Certain it is that types do not necessarily imply that the antitype is dimly known. The Lord may use them as he uses Gospel ordinances at present, to convey light to us and leave more indelible impressions. A German writer (Hahn) has said, "Types were institutions intended to deepen, expand, and ennoble the circle of thoughts and desires, and thus heighten the moral and spiritual wants, as well as the intelligence and susceptibility of the chosen people." And not less truly is this point touched upon by the Reformer Tindal in his "Prologue into the Third Book of Moses":

Though sacrifices and ceremonies can be no ground or foundation to build upon--that is, though we can prove naught with them--yet, when we have once found out Christ and his mysteries, then we may borrow figures, that is to say, allegories, similitudes, and examples, *to open Christ, and the secrets of God hid in Christ, even unto the quick*; and can declare them more lively and sensibly with them than with all the words of the world. For similitudes have more virtue and power with them than bare words, and lead a man's understanding further into the pith and marrow and spiritual understanding of the thing, than all the words that can be imagined.

Again he says, "Allegories *prove* nothing; but the very use of allegories is to declare and open a text that it may be better perceived and understood." "There is not a better, more vehement, or mightier thing to make a man understand withal than an allegory. For allegories make a man quick-witted, and print wisdom in him, and make it to abide, when bare words go but in at the one ear and out at the other."

The Epistle to the Hebrews lays down the principles upon which we are to interpret Leviticus. The specimens there given of types applied, furnish a model for our guidance in other cases. And the writer's manner of address in that Epistle leads us to suppose that it was no new thing for an Israelite thus to understand the ritual of Moses. No doubt old Simeon (Luke 2:25) frequented the temple daily in order to read in its rites future development of a suffering Saviour, as well as to pray and worship. Anna, the prophetess, did the same; for all these knew that they prophesied of the grace that was to come to us, and therefore inquired and searched diligently (1 Pet. 1:10).

Had Aaron, or some other holy priest of his line, been "carried away in the spirit" and shown the accomplishment of all that these rites prefigured, how joyful ever afterwards would have been his daily service in the sanctuary. When shown the great antitype, and that each one of these shadows pictured something in the person or work of that Redeemer, then ever after to handle the

vessels of the sanctuary would be rich food to his soul. It would be "feeding beside the still waters and in green pastures." For the bondage of these elements did not consist in sprinkling the blood, washing in the laver, waving the wave-shoulder, or the like; but in doing all this without perceiving the truth thereby exhibited. Probably to a true Israelite, taught of God, there would be no more of bondage in handling these material elements than there is at this day to a true believer in handling the symbolic bread and wine through which he "discerns the body and blood of the Lord." It would be an Israelite's hope every morning, as he left the "dwellings of Jacob," to see "in the gates of Zion" more of the Lamb of God while gazing on the morning sacrifice. "I will compass thine altar, O Lord, that I may publish with the voice of thanksgiving, and tell of all thy wondrous works" (Ps. 26:6,7). And as the sun declined he would seek to have his soul again anointed, after a busy day's vexations, by beholding the evening Lamb.

Tindal says, that while there is "a star-light of Christ" in all the ceremonies, there is in some so truly "the light of the broad day" that he cannot but believe that God had showed Moses the secrets of Christ and the very manner of his death beforehand. At all events, it was what they did see of Christ through this medium that so endeared to them the tabernacle and the temple-courts. It was the very home of their souls. "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts! My soul longs, yea even faints for the courts of the Lord!" (Ps.84:1,2)

And it is thus we can understand how those thousands (or rather, tens of thousands) who believed, were all "zealous of the law" (Acts 21:20). The Christian elders of Jerusalem, including James and other Apostles, lent their sanction to their zeal in some degree; and Paul himself saw nothing necessarily sinful in it. For it was all well if they used the law only as "their schoolmaster to bring them to Christ" (Gal. 3:24). It must have been thus that Paul himself employed his thoughts while "purifying himself" in the temple and engaging in the other ordinances regarding vows (Acts 21:26). His thoughts would be on the Antitype; and possibly the actual performing of these rites by a fully enlightened soul might lead to some distinct views of truth contained in them, which would have escaped the observation of a mere spectator.

And, if we may throw out a conjecture on a subject where Millenarians and Anti-millenarians are alike at sea--is it not possible that some such end as this may be answered by the temple which Ezekiel foretells as yet to be built (ch. 40 &c.)? Believing nations may frequent that temple in order to get understanding in these types and shadows. They may go up to the mountain of the Lord's house to be there taught his ways (Isa. 2:3). In that temple they may learn how not one tittle of the law has failed. As they look on the sons of Zadok ministering in that peculiar sanctuary, they may learn portions of truth with new impressiveness and fulness. Indeed, the very fact that the order of arrangement in Ezekiel entirely differs from the order observed in either tabernacle or temple, and that the edifice itself is reared on a plan varying from every former sanctuary, is sufficient to suggest the idea that it is meant to cast light on former types and shadows.

Many Levitical rites appear to us unmeaning. But they would not do so if presented in a new relation. As it is said of the rigid features of a marble statue, that they may be made to move and vary their expression so as even to smile when a skilful hand knows how to move a bright light before it, so may it be with these apparently lifeless figures in the light of that bright Millennial Day. At all events, it is probably then that this much-neglected Book of Leviticus shall be fully appreciated. Israel--the good Olive tree--shall again yield its fatness to the nations round (Rom. 11:17). Their ancient ritual may then be more fully understood, and blessed truth found beaming

forth from long obscurity. When Jesus, the High Priest, comes forth from the holiest, there may be here fountains of living water to which he shall lead us--himself seen to be the glorious Antitype, the Alpha and the Omega!

But let us proceed to the contents of this Book. It will be found that it contains a full system of truth, exhibiting sin and the sinner, grace and the Saviour; comprehending also details of duty and openings into the ages to come--what, in short, bears upon a sinner's walk with a reconciled God and his conversation in this present evil world. Our Heavenly Father has condescended to teach his children by most expressive pictures; and, even in this, much of his love appears.

The one great principle of interpretation which we keep before us is Apostolic practice. This is the key we have used. We find the sacred writers adduce the likeness that exists between the thing that was typified and the type itself, and resting satisfied there. So we lay down this as our great rule, there must be obvious resemblance. And next, we search into these types, in the belief that Christ is the centre-truth of revelation; and surely no principle is more obviously true? The body or substance of the law is Christ (Col. 2:17) and types are a series of shadows projected from Christ "the body." It is this Messiah that has been, from the beginning, the chief object to be unveiled to the view of men; and in the fact that New Testament light has risen, lies our advantage in searching what these things signify. Mr. M'Cheyne, of Dundee, thus expressed himself on one occasion regarding this point, in a letter to a friend:

Suppose that one to whom you were a stranger was wrapt in a thick veil, so that you could not discern his features. Still if the lineaments were pointed out to you through the folds, you could form some idea of the beauty and form of the veiled one. But suppose that one whom you know and love--whose features you have often studied face to face--were to be veiled up in this way, how easily you could discern the features and form of this Beloved One! Just so, *the Jews* looked upon a veiled Saviour, whom they had never seen unveiled. *We*, under the New Testament, look upon an unveiled Saviour; and, going back on the Old, we can see far better than the Jews could the features and form of Jesus the Beloved under that veil. In Isaac offered (Gen. 22), in the scape-goat (Lev. 16), in the shadow of the great rock (Isa. 32:2), in the apple tree (Song 2:2), what exquisite pictures there are seen of Jesus! and how much more plainly we can see the meaning than believers of old.

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The space of a month was occupied in delivering the various ordinances of this Book to Moses. This is proved from Exod. 40:17 compared with Num. 1:1. It is the revelations of that one memorable month that are now to form the subject of our study. *Witsius* (De Mysterio Tab.) has remarked that God took only six days to creation, but spent forty days with Moses in directing him to make the tabernacle--because the *work of grace* is more glorious than the work of creation. And so we find *the law* from Sinai occupying three days at most, while these rules that exhibited the love and grace of God are spread over many weeks.