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## Why is Leviticus so bloody?



### Dead

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, STOP! How many resolutions to read the Bible come to a halt at the third book? Leviticus can be a difficult read. It's repetitious, its culture seems alien, and there's so much blood. Why? Burnt offerings, fellowship offerings, sin offerings – all of them produced lots of blood and all ended up with dead animals. Leviticus, which provides the fullest description of these rituals, seems to define religion in terms of bloodiness and may seem out of tune with New Testament spirituality. Christians believe that sacrifice prefigures the Easter story, but why did there have to be *so much* blood-letting?

### Change

The 'hollow face' optical illusion consists of a mask-like image that seems to flip from concave to convex as you look at it. First you see it as if you are looking into the back of a mask, then your eyes flip the image so that the mask face is looking outwards. That is what happened to me one day as I read chapter 17 of the book of Leviticus. The passage commanded the wandering Israelites not to offer sacrifices outside the camp or anywhere inside it, except at the centralised "tent of meeting". These verses don't *promote* sacrifices; they *restrict* them! Leviticus is bloody because it spoke to a culture that was thoroughly soaked in blood; but Levitical rules began to change all that. Let's re-examine the context.

### Unacceptable

When the laws of Moses spoke about blood sacrifice, they were not introducing a new concept. Sacrifices were common practise for the ancient Hebrews and most of the nations and tribes surrounding them. They were probably universal in primitive times. Against that background, Mosaic Law didn't *multiply* sacrifices; it *limited* them. Moses listed just a small number of animal species that could be offered as sacrifices – cattle, sheep or goats, and doves. Many nations, probably including the Hebrews, were accustomed to presenting all kinds of creatures for sacrifice – even humans. Archaeological discoveries and ancient textual records tell us that many cultures carried out human sacrifice. The practise was sufficiently familiar to the Israelites that it was necessary to make a specific law to ban it<sup>2</sup>. In the book of Genesis, we are told that Abraham was willing to comply with the apparent command to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Perhaps human sacrifice was a familiar concept to him<sup>3</sup>; but God showed him that it was unacceptable.



## Golden rule

Leviticus opens a theme that recurs throughout the Old Testament. Levitical rules restricted the few types of animals that could be sacrificed; they determined the purposes for which sacrifice could be used; they defined the ways in which the ritual could be done; they limited who could do it (just the priests); and they narrowed down to just one place the location where sacrifices could be offered. Despite first appearances, Leviticus was *reducing* the bloodiness of worship, *not increasing* it. And, by the way, it is the book of Leviticus that gives us the ‘golden rule’ to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ (Chapter 19, verse 18)

## Unauthorised

In the historical books of Kings and Chronicles we see the place where sacrifices could be offered defined as a hilltop in Jerusalem. But king after king is criticised for failing to stop the people from sacrificing in “high places”<sup>1</sup>, that is, any handy hilltop where people habitually practiced their unauthorised rituals. God’s clear command was to centralise and minimise the bloodiness of worship. And the reduction process continued throughout the Old Testament. Prophet after prophet declared that sacrifice was secondary<sup>4</sup> and there were better ways to worship God. What mattered was not the rituals, but how people lived their lives.

## Destroyed

In the year AD70, the Jerusalem temple – the only place where sacrifices could be offered under Jewish law – was utterly destroyed by a Roman army. There was no longer any place for blood sacrifices. However, by that time, the process of restricting blood sacrifices that began in Leviticus had reached completion. The only sacrifice that made a real difference had already been offered by the one person qualified to do it<sup>5</sup> – the man we know as Jesus the Christ.

## Compatible

So, if you’ve read as far as Leviticus, don’t give up. It’s not the end of the Gospel story, but it’s a compatible beginning. It may seem bloody, but it’s setting the scene for many good stories that follow. Its restrictions on blood sacrifices point forwards to the Gospel of mercy and peace.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 3:2-3; 12:31-32; 13:2; 13:32-33; 14:23; 15:14; 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3-4; 15:4; 15:35; 16:4; 17:9; 17:29; 17:32; 18:4; 18:22; 21:3; 21:5; 23:8-9; 23:13; 23:19-20; 2 Chronicles 11:15; 14:3; 15:17; 17:6; 20:33; 21:11; 28:4; 28:25; 31:1; 32:12; 33:3; 33:17; 33:19; 34:3

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 18:10

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 22:1-17

<sup>4</sup> 1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 40:6; 51:16; Proverbs 15:8; 21:3; Isaiah 66:3; Amos 4:5; Malachi 1:10

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 10:4-14