

The Half Hour That Changes the World

Leviticus

Book 3

Basic Questions behind the book:

Is there a division between the 'sacred' and the 'secular'?

Summary of book:

Most scholars think this book apart from chapters 17-26, belongs to what is called the 'Priestly Code', a set of instructions on how to operate as a priest in the Temple at Jerusalem. It is concerned mainly with the Levitical priesthood and the laws that the priests were responsible for administering. It is one of the least read books of the Old Testament. It contains no stories about Moses and the Hebrews wandering in the desert. It is all prescriptions about how to worship and how to be holy. 'Holiness' in Hebrew thought can mean 'wholeness, health, purity and righteousness'. The rituals were (and still should be!) a visual aid to the rest of the society. A social order, based on faith in God, was both possible and effective for the good of all the inhabitants of the community. The laws and rules in Leviticus point to truths which are still valid, even though the rituals themselves are not. The rituals may be obsolete, but the underlying principles they are based upon are still vital. Principles lead to values, and values lead to behaviours, and behaviours are encapsulated in rituals.

Vital Statistics:

Purpose: A handbook for the priests and Levites outlining their duties in worship, and a guidebook of holy living for the Hebrews.

Author: Traditionally thought of as Moses, but more likely the present book of Leviticus comes from the later period of the Temple when the priesthood was well developed.

Recipients: The Israelites

Dating: These laws were given by Moses to the Israelites around 1225 BC. Lots of other tribes also had taboos and sacrifices at this time, so the Israelites were not unusual.

Setting: Supposedly, at the foot of Mount Sinai. God is teaching the Israelites how to live as holy people.

Reflections:

The religious rituals are closely linked with the order of life and justice. The sabbatical year and the Jubilee present such justice and fairness.

Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice for all sin.

What rituals do we engage in that would need to be unpacked and explained?

"Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." (19:2)