



Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 4, Leviticus (hartley), 593pp

John E. Hartley

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Although it is at the heart of the Pentateuch, the book of Leviticus is sometimes dismissed as dry and legalistic material with little relevance to modern religious concerns. But in this commentary Dr. John Hartley perceives that the message of Leviticus—the significance of pure worship and holy living—is also the heart of vital faith in any age. Amid the prescriptions for sacrifice and ritual to be observed by Israel in the wilderness, the author finds useful observations for the people of God today.

The emphasis of Leviticus on true worship, and on ordering the ethical life according to the will of Yahweh instead of idols, was at the heart of Israel's *raison d'être*, Dr. Hartley notes. Viewed in this light, such prescriptions as the "Holiness Code" (chapters 17-26) are far more than a list of ritual observances; they are Israel's response to God's charge to "be holy, for I, Yahweh, your God, am holy."

Leviticus' focus on the Aaronic priesthood also receives special attention in this treatment. The Levites are the designated communicators charged with transmitting God's law through Moses—indeed, the purpose of the book "to preserve divine sermons for the instruction of the congregation in cultic and ethical matters." Yet, despite their insistence on correct form and content in worship, the Levites do not become authoritarian protectors of a secret code in the manner of pagan priests. Since the formulas were proclaimed to the congregation, they became an informed laity exerting a balancing dynamic on the priests as well as receiving ministry from them.

The author's sensitivity to theological concern makes this commentary useful in expository preaching. his introduction includes essays on the themes of holiness, God's presence, the covenant, sacrifice, and the relation of Leviticus to the New Testament.

On the widely disputed question of authorship Dr. Hartley affirms the text's claim that "Yahweh spoke to Moses . . ." and that Leviticus helped shape the nation's worship and life instead of merely reflecting existing practices. Yet he also acknowledges the evidence that some of the material shows the community's dynamic interpretation of how God's word through Moses was to be applied in their daily lives. This two-edged sword of loyalty to the text and to the community's life makes the commentary useful in "discovering ways that contemporary communities of faith may be shaped and empowered by the received Word of God."

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