The Bloodstained Path to God

Experiencing Worship With Old Testament Believers

Daniel and Sarah Habben

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of this book

Good photographers understand how contrasting light and shadow enhances a composition. In a similar way, God has recorded “shadows” of Christ in the Old Testament in order for us to see the light of the Savior more clearly.

Unfortunately, many Bible readers find that those shadows of Christ leave them in the dark! As you read Leviticus, for example, rather than being enlightened, you may find yourself groping through unfamiliar details and obscure obligations. You wouldn’t be the first to skip over books like Leviticus in search of more digestible material. In fact, if your church follows the three-year cycle of Bible readings included in Christian Worship, you will hear only one Leviticus passage every three years!¹

However, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful” (2 Timothy 3:16). God designed and recorded these Old Testament laws for a reason. If we bypass these pages of Scripture, we cheat ourselves of a deeper understanding of God’s plan of salvation. This book is intended to help you navigate the Old Testament ceremonies, festivals, and laws with a sense of confidence rather than confusion—and with more than that, with a sense of wonder at God’s graphic love for sinners!

The heart of the Torah

Getting to the heart of a matter means you are attempting to find its center or pulse. Present-day writers often reveal the heart of

¹One additional Leviticus reading (Good Friday, Series B) has been added to the supplemental lectionary in the Christian Worship: Supplement.
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their work only at the end. But if you were an ancient Hebrew author, you would help your readers locate the heart of your poetry or prose by plunking it right in the middle of the work. That’s where we will look for the heart of the Old Testament laws. We will burrow into their center.

First, though, we need to understand where in the Bible the Old Testament laws are found. The simple answer is in the books of Moses. Yet books is not the best term to use to describe Moses’ writings. God’s inspired author Moses wrote only one book, which the Jewish people called the Torah, or Law. This one work was divided into five parts, which we call the “books” of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Moses’ single book was divided into these five parts for purely practical reasons. The book of Moses was far too long to squeeze onto the 25-foot scrolls used by the Israelites. A longer scroll wasn’t the solution, since it would be too heavy to lift. Instead, the writings of Moses were divided into the five books we have today. The Greek term for Moses’ writing, Pentateuch, or five volumes, is an appropriate name for this body of work.

By remembering that the Torah is really one book, we can more easily find its center, heart, and pulse. A simple count tells you that the third scroll, which corresponds to the book of Leviticus, lies at the center of Moses’ writings. (As we go along, we will be referring to the Torah chart at the beginning of this book.)

“Hmmm, . . . ” you might think, “Leviticus? But that book is so, to put it bluntly, dull!” True, compared to the thrills and chills of Genesis and Exodus, it is easy to get bogged down once your home devotions enter the chapters of Leviticus. The hundreds of commandments in the Torah seem to belong to an alien culture. All that slaying of cute and furry animals! All those suffocating lifestyle restrictions! All those complicated and curious rituals! To those of us who were weaned on action-packed Bible stories like Noah’s ark and David and Goliath, it may come as a surprise that in Jesus’ day, unwieldy Leviticus was the first portion of the Torah studied by Jewish children.

“Poor things!” you think. “But surely we present-day Christians have little to gain from studying those obsolete laws. Are they really
the ‘heart’ of the matter?” The simple answer is yes! The book of Leviticus with its sin-payments, substitutes, and sacrifices is the forensic scientist’s equivalent of finding multiple clear fingerprints. For the Old Testament believers, those fingerprints created their identity. They were like fingerprints that clearly distinguished them from the ungodly nations living next door. Their fingerprints especially identified them as heirs of God’s promised forgiveness and linked them to the Savior.

By faith, we in the New Testament have those same fingerprints. They identify us as followers of the same Savior whom the Old Testament Jews looked forward to. Like the Emmaus disciples, our hearts too are “burning within us” as we become aware of the intricate, inspiring links between the Old Testament laws and their fulfillment by the Lamb of God (Luke 24:13-32).

Now burrow deeper. The central chapter of Leviticus is chapter 16. Here is the heart of the heart. What we read about in this chapter is the most important lesson God wants to teach us through his servant Moses. But what is so important about the rituals described in Leviticus chapter 16? Why would Moses draw particular attention to this part of the Law by cushioning it between all the other directives for faithful, orderly worship found in the Torah? That is where we will start in chapter I as we follow the bloodstained path that God directed his Old Testament people to walk. But first, a few more comments on the Law.

Thankful obedience

The multitude of Old Testament laws leads some people to conclude that the Israelites were to earn salvation by obeying the commandments. Not so. Romans 3:28 tells us that Old Testament believers were saved in the same way as New Testament believers are. Both are “justified by faith apart from observing the law.” God’s relationship with his people has always followed the same pattern: God first acts on his people’s behalf, then he asks for their obedience. New Testament Christians understand this. While we were still sinners, Christ won our salvation. Therefore, we live lives of thank-
ful obedience (Romans 5:8; 12:1). Old Testament believers understood this too. God told the Israelites at Sinai, “Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5,6). This promotion from anonymous to anointed was surely not a reward for good behavior. The Israelites’ exodus was a trail of tears and testing, of mutiny and mudslinging! No, God’s blessings on Israel were acts of mercy. And the commandments? They were given after God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. In grace, God chose insignificant Israel to receive his revelations, preserve his Word, and bear witness to his power. The Israelites strove to obey the laws God gave them in the Torah as a response to his grace.

It may also seem logical to conclude that in giving the endless laws and sacrifices of the Old Testament, God was playing the role of a playground bully: daily rubbing the Israelites’ noses in their sins and holding them hostage to their guilt. It’s easy to imagine the Israelites bent over beneath a burden of fearful obedience, dreading another day when they would only fail yet again to meet God’s demands.

This book strives to highlight how the Old Testament laws were not only God’s stern voice of judgment (law) but also his assuring voice of merciful love (gospel). That mercy shines in God’s promise to the Israelites in Leviticus 16:30, where he tells his people, “Before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins.” Each sacrifice, upheld by God’s promise, truly forgave and atoned for sins. Each sacrifice pointed the Israelites to the real payment for sin: the atoning blood of Jesus. His death on the cross would pay off every sin-debt—past, present, and future.

King David had faith in the promised Messiah. He trusted that God had a final solution to his sin. That is why he did not drag his heels en route to God’s house. Instead, he set off with a spring in his step and a song of thankful obedience: “At his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy” (Psalm 27:6). It is our hope that you will experience some of this joy as you accompany some Old Testament believers along the bloodstained path to God.
How this book is organized

This book begins with the heart of the Torah: the Day of Atonement detailed in Leviticus chapter 16. The foldout in the front cover will help you visualize the important central role this day plays in the five books of Moses.

Each chapter begins with one or more readings from Scripture that describe the laws addressed in the chapter. If you wish, spend time reading the entire section in the reference located before the short excerpt provided. The chapter then continues with background material to create a context for the laws.

The laws are then “dramatized” within a vignette to help make God’s instructions personal and to demonstrate the spirit in which God wanted his people to observe them. These little stories address the who, what, where, when, how, and why questions about the Old Testament laws and ceremonies. The Lord set up a “church year” for his Old Testament people, just as your church follows a church year, starting with Advent and Christmas and continuing through Easter and Pentecost. On this page is a chart
of the Jewish church year. You will see this chart at the beginning of each chapter to orient you to the season of the church the chapter describes. The details of rituals and festivals within these vignettes are either taken directly from the Bible or from long-standing Jewish tradition.

Each chapter closes with a “Sacred Silhouette,” a section that briefly explains how these rituals pointed ahead to Christ and were fulfilled by him.

In the vignettes you will meet four main characters: Natan, a devout Jewish father; Shlomo, his 11-year-old son; Jeshua, a young priest new to his role; and Johanan, the high priest. Johanan is a historical figure who seems to have served as the high priest in the latter days of King Solomon’s reign and the beginning of King Rehoboam’s reign. He is little more than a name listed in 1 Chronicles 6:9, and any portrayal of him in these vignettes is fictional.

Two locales are used in the vignettes: the city of Hebron and the holy city of Jerusalem, 25 miles to the north of Hebron. The sacrifices and other rituals take place in Solomon’s temple rather than in the tent-church, or tabernacle, that Moses built for the Israelites in the wilderness—although the same laws were followed in both places.

A little historical background

The vignettes are set in 930 B.C., shortly after King Solomon’s death. Although Solomon strayed from God’s Word when he married scores of wives and was ensnared by their idol worship (I Kings 11), his reign was a highpoint in Israel’s history. It was a time when, for the most part, God’s temple was revered, his priests served faithfully, and the people were devoted to God’s laws.

2We will use the present-day Jewish calendar, in effect since the Babylonian captivity. The month names vary somewhat from those referenced in Scripture. For example, in Scripture the first month is called Abib, but in the present-day calendar, it is called Nisan.
After Solomon’s death, the kingdom split into two parts—Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Solomon’s son Rehoboam became king in Judah at age 41 and reigned for 17 years. For the first three years of his kingship, he was “walking in the ways of David and Solomon” (2 Chronicles 11:17). During those years King Rehoboam fortified cities along major roads, including Hebron, putting his sons in charge of them and filling the cities with military commanders and stores of food and weapons (2 Chronicles 11:5-12,23). King Rehoboam also received the faithful priests and Levites who were expelled from the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the unblushingly wicked King Jeroboam, who had gleefully set up non-Levite priests to minister before false idols in the shapes of goats and calves (2 Chronicles 11:15). People from the Northern Kingdom “who [had] set their hearts on seeking the LORD, the God of Israel” were also welcomed in Judah, where they fled so they could continue worshiping the true God (2 Chronicles 11:16).

The vignettes in this book are set within this three-year period. They describe the various laws, offerings, and pilgrimages as if the majority of Jews still observed them. In reality, the system was a broken one. Rarely does the Bible record even major festivals being observed, and then only in a belated attempt to resurrect them. Second Chronicles chapters 29 and 30 tell the fascinating history of King Hezekiah’s spiritual reforms. He began his reign by reopening the temple, which by his day had been abandoned (715 B.C.). You can almost hear the rusty doors screeching open and see Hezekiah’s men shredding cobwebs as they walked through the Holy Place. Then Hezekiah had to round up the negligent priests and Levites for a stern lecture! Under Hezekiah’s direction, both the temple and the hearts of the Levites underwent a renovation in time for a Passover celebration, the likes of which hadn’t been seen since Solomon’s reign. Nehemiah 8:9-18 provides another example of a spiritual revival (445 B.C.).

The regrettable mouthful of forbidden fruit Adam and Eve ate in the Garden of Eden means that people can no longer walk as friends with God, let alone stay in step with his holy expectations. Our sins, like those sins of old, have built a chasm between us and a holy God. But God has bridged the chasm! God began building the
bridge with the Old Testament system of sacrifice, which provided a blood covering for the Israelites’ sin and foreshadowed the superior sacrifice of God’s Son, Jesus.

It’s time to set our feet on that ancient, bloodstained path to God. Our journey through the Old Testament laws will begin on the Day of Atonement, in the month of Tishri, the seventh month in the Jewish calendar year. This month, because of all the sacred festivals found in it, is the most holy month in the Jewish church year. It is a signpost on God’s path that points directly to the cross and the cleansing blood of Christ.
Leviticus 10 and 16—Nadab and Abihu’s Disobedience

Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron and his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, “Do not let your hair become unkempt, and do not tear your clothes, or you will die and the LORD will be angry with the whole community. But your relatives, all the house of Israel, may mourn for those the LORD has destroyed by fire.” (Leviticus 10:1,2,6)

The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the LORD. The LORD said to Moses: “Tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover.
“This is how Aaron is to enter the sanctuary area: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments; so he must bathe himself with water before he puts them on.” (Leviticus 16:1-4)

Leviticus chapter 16 is not only the heart of the Torah, it has also been called the drama of our salvation. It describes the Day of Atonement rituals that, according to God’s promise, (1) cleansed the people of all their sin and (2) cleansed the sanctuary from all impurity. God intended this annual salvation drama to cause his people to long for the promised Messiah, who would do for them what was being enacted symbolically.3

Leviticus chapter 16 opens with a flashback to the fiery fate of Aaron’s unpriestly sons, Nadab and Abihu. These men, who had just been ordained into the priesthood, offered incense to God in a manner that dishonored the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-3). In response, God struck them dead with fire. Because Aaron was the high priest, he was not allowed to touch a dead body, so he had to squash his natural impulse as a parent to touch the bodies of his sons or even mourn their sudden death. Instead, he kept a silent vigil in the tabernacle, replaying in his mind God’s object lesson: no one may dare approach God on their own terms because God is holy and human beings are not. This was troubling for Aaron. After all, his own prints were all over a previous crime scene where he had hosted an idolatrous party with a golden calf as the guest of honor. His weakness had led to the death of three thousand Israelites (Exodus 32). How could he ever stand in God’s holy presence and survive?

In Leviticus chapter 16, God teaches Aaron the proper way to approach him so that Aaron would not be destroyed. God shows Aaron how to decontaminate himself—not with bleach, but with blood. With blood Aaron was to cleanse himself, the sanctuary, and the community from “all the wickedness and rebellion of the

Israelites—all their sins” (Leviticus 16:21). This included unintentional sins of which the priest or community was unaware.

This head-to-toe cleansing was scheduled for once a year on the Day of Atonement, a day that made a polluted people “at one” with a holy God. The Hebrew term for the Day of Atonement is Yom Kippur. The basic word in this term could be translated as either “day of covering,” “day of removing,” or “day of ransom.” Although these translations seem unrelated, they all draw an accurate picture of the rituals of Yom Kippur. On this day the Israelites’ sinful fingerprints, so offensive to their holy God, were covered by the blood of substitute animals. Their sinful deeds were removed onto the back of a scapegoat. And all this was possible because of the future ransom Jesus would pay with his blood.

The majority of the yearly rituals and ceremonies were conducted with the help of an entire division of priests and Levites. However, the duties of Yom Kippur belonged almost exclusively to the high priest. As you will soon see, it was a day that demanded of the high priest a mind for detail, the arm of a butcher, plenty of footwork, and, most important, a heart of repentance.

Our vignette in this chapter opens soon after the civil new year celebration, the first day of the month Tishri. Like us, the Jews celebrated a civil year (which for us is celebrated on January 1) and a church year (which for us begins at the end of November). The first month of the Israelite civil year was Tishri, and the first month of their church year was Abib, or Nisan. As you can see from the church year diagram, the great Day of Atonement figured prominently into both the civil year and the church year. (Tishri is in the fall of the year, and Nisan [Abib] is in the spring.)

In the vignette you will meet an 11-year-old boy named Shlomo and his father, Natan. They live in the town of Hebron, 25 miles south of Jerusalem. Observe the feelings of this Jewish family as the tenth day of Tishri, the Day of Atonement, approaches—emotions perhaps similar to those of a present-day Christian who looks forward to receiving Holy Communion after a long absence. As a devout Jewish father, Natan is following God’s command in Leviticus 16:29 to participate in the Day of Atonement by resting and fasting.
The story—Natan prepares his family for the Day of Atonement

The ninth day of Tishri drew to a close under a pregnant gray sky, following months of dry summer heat. The crops were long stored, the fruits gathered, and the land was awaiting the autumn rains. Shlomo’s father, Natan, turned from the doorway and clapped his hands together, sending out a small puff of dust.

“Yes, Shlomo, my son, if Yahweh⁴ wills, we will soon have rain! So God softens the ground for the new crop. It is a good time to study the Torah. So God softens our hard hearts with his Word.”

Shlomo grinned. It was a speech he had heard every Tishri since he was born, 11 seasons ago. His Aba loved to study and discuss the words God had given Moses, and none were more dear to him than the vivid details and instructions of Leviticus.

Natan continued his annual speech. “Tomorrow is the tenth day of Tishri, the great Day of Atonement. We will rest from our work and deny our bellies. We will mourn over our sins that separate us from God.

“But,” Natan smacked his breast, “we also have hope in our hearts, Shlomo! For tomorrow the Most Holy Place will be open to the high priest. Blood will be dashed on God’s mercy seat! Our sins will trot off into the desert on the scapegoat! Our guilt will be lifted, and the sanctuary will be cleansed! That, Shlomo, is God’s gracious promise to us.”

Aba’s hands settled on Shlomo’s shoulders with a painful squeeze. “Come. Sit down with your old Aba. Let us begin our review in the heart of the Torah, with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.”

On cue, Shlomo asked his father, “Why do you call the Day of Atonement the heart of the Torah, Aba?”

“It is in the heart of the Torah that we see God’s heart for sinners. You and I cannot stand before a holy God unless our sins are

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⁴Jewish tradition states that God’s name, often written as Yahweh, was only spoken by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Mishnah Yoma 6:2). Otherwise the people addressed God as Adonai (my Lord), Ha-Shem (the Name), or simply Elohim (God). Since it’s not clear when this practice started, our vignette characters will use the more familiar Yahweh.
covered. God designed the rituals of the Day of Atonement to do just that. Because of his promises, God hides his face from our sins and blots out all our guilty deeds” (Psalm 51:9).

“But we perform sin and burnt offerings all year long, Aba. What makes Yom Kippur different?”

“Hmmm.” Natan scrubbed rapidly at his beard with one thick forefinger as he considered an explanation. “Think of your mother. You know your Ima loves you because she tells you so. Despite your great, long legs, she allows you on her lap! She keeps you clean. She rises early every morning to bake your bread. But every now and then she throws into that dough a handful of sweet raisins. Why does she do this? Every mouthful you chew of that raisin bread is saying, ‘I love you.’ Ima is telling you in a new way that you are her dear son.”

Natan ignored the audible growl from Shlomo’s empty stomach. He flung out his arms, a wide smile creasing his leathery face. “So much does God cherish Israel that on the Day of Atonement he assures us in a fresh, new way that we are forgiven and our offerings are accepted. He paints us a picture that we cannot ignore: all the sins that weigh on our hearts are confessed over the scapegoat, who carries them out of sight, as far as the east is from the west! And not only are God’s people cleansed, but also his temple! Just think, Shlomo, all year our sins have darkened the doorways of God’s house. They have soiled his sanctuary and are piled in a stinking heap on his altar. Just as we do not allow our own oxen to stay in a filthy stall, how much less can we expect God to dwell in the midst of our sin? Those sins must be hauled out! True, the high priest won’t use a pitchfork to remove those sins. He’ll use the lifeblood of a bull and a goat. I don’t know how it all works, Shlomo, but that’s what God promises. And when all is purified, God’s people can approach his altar again and meet with him there.”

“And yet, Aba, we are never done being cleansed, for the Day of Atonement comes every year.”

Natan regarded him solemnly. “You are right, son. God in his mercy leaves our sins unpunished. But for perfect, permanent cleansing we must wait for the Promised One, who will crush Satan and redeem God’s people.”
A smile pleated the corners of his eyes. “Now, call your sister and mother. We will begin our review of the heart of the Torah, so we can see in here”—he tapped his head—“and here”—he tapped his heart—“what is about to take place on our behalf in Jerusalem.”

Sacred silhouettes

How many of these Old Testament laws and rituals were properly understood as road signs pointing to the Savior? Devout Jews searched the laws and rituals for any connection to the first promise of a Savior (Genesis 3:15). There God had promised that someone born of a woman would “crush” Satan. And he himself would be “struck” in the process.

No doubt the Israelites understood that their sacrifices were connected with the promised Savior, whom they referred to as the Messiah. They understood that their own blood should have been shed and their own bodies burned on the altar of burnt offering as just punishment for sin. Instead, the laws of sacrifice made it clear that God would accept a lamb in their place as punishment for the sins of each and every one of them!

As time went on, God added details to the pictures he had painted in Leviticus. Already in Deuteronomy 18:15-19 Moses directed the Israelites to look forward to the Great Prophet whom God would raise up from their nation—a fellow Jew, a human being, just like one of them. Later, prophets like Isaiah and Micah added more pieces to the puzzle, specific details about the Messiah’s birth and death. (For some good examples, stop and read Isaiah 7:14; 9:6,7; all of Isaiah chapter 53; and Micah 5:2.)

It may seem to us that the details of God’s plan of intervention were rather sketchy. Yet the Holy Spirit delivered flashes of insight to believers like Job, who could make the startlingly precise confession: “I know that my Redeemer lives” (Job 19:25). How many other such flashes of insight went unrecorded during the long years of anticipation? Perhaps more than we can imagine.

It is a great tragedy that despite the Old Testament “road signs,” the priests and other religious leaders of Jesus’ day allowed the Old
Testament shadows of the Messiah to overshadow the living, breathing reality—the Messiah himself, Jesus of Nazareth! He was the fulfillment of generations of bloody preliminaries. Just as the paparazzi today make it their business to spot a star, even dressed incognito, so the Jewish religious leaders should have stampeded to Jesus the Messiah when his words and actions matched the Old Testament prophecies they knew so well. Indeed, Jesus himself said, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39,40).

The Old Testament testimony to the Messiah came not only in the form of direct prophecies of what he would do but in a myriad of pictures and in a grand performance in which the Israelites themselves were actors. The yearly, monthly, and daily scheme of sacrificing forced God’s people to think about the aspect of life that he considered most important—the forgiveness of sins.

Perhaps you have already begun to wonder what these sacrifices actually achieved. You might especially wonder about the apparent contradiction between God’s promise in Leviticus 16:30b, “Before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins,” and in Hebrews, where the writer states that the annual sacrifices were only a “reminder” to the people of their sins “because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:3,4).

So which was it? Did the sacrifices only highlight sin and remind the Israelites of their guilt, or did they truly cover sin over and give forgiveness? Look at it this way. Each sacrifice highlighted sin by forcing Old Testament believers to constantly confess that their sins were serious and deserved the death penalty. The animal sacrifices, however, were not themselves the payment. They were essentially I.O.U. notes from God. In one sense every sacrifice was a promise from God, that he himself would someday offer a sacrifice which would have real and lasting value. In mercy, God left the sins of his people unpunished, having planned from eternity to punish his own, sinless Son instead (Romans 3:25).

At the same time, the sacrifices truly covered sin and gave forgiveness to Old Testament believers. On its own the blood of these animals couldn’t actually do anything. But the blood was used by God’s
command and connected with God’s Word. God attached a promise to those sacrifices; a promise that linked the people to the atoning blood of Jesus.

Does this remind you of our New Testament Sacrament of Baptism? Baptism saves because plain water, which is powerless on its own, is used by God’s command and with his word of promise. While Baptism looks back on Jesus’ sacrifice for forgiveness, the Old Testament sacrifices looked ahead to it. To be beneficial, both rites require faith, which God alone gives.

Although God’s people had to wait for the Messiah, God did not make them wait for forgiveness or peace. His system of animal sacrifice, upheld by his promise, not only drove home their need for a Savior but also gave them real rest and freedom from their burden of guilt. Truly cleansed. Truly forgiven. No wonder relief resonates in King David’s words: “When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions” (Psalm 65:3). Old Testament believers did not find a wrathful, terrifying God at the altar of burnt offering; they met the Savior-God.