

# THE RELEVANCE OF YAHWEH'S SOCIAL ETHICS IN LEVITICUS FOR CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA SOCIETY.

By

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## Abstract

The book of Leviticus is one of the books that readers intend or seek to bypass while examining the Biblical books. Some readers see it as a difficult book in terms of comprehension and also as a book not applicable to the issues affecting contemporary society, as emphasis are laid on the laws or injunctions about the offering of sacrifices and conducts in worship. Hence, such practices are seen as obsolete or archaic to contemporary society.

Interestingly, a careful observation of the book of Leviticus unearth rich theological premises, expounded on the relationship between YHWH (God's name transliterates to YHWH which is known as tetragrammaton) and Israel, where the laws of YHWH can be interpreted to be YHWH'S social ethics aimed at guiding the Israelites enforcing orderliness in all ramifications of life.

This article powers on examining the book of Leviticus, using it as a model to showcase the relevance of Yahweh's social ethics in Leviticus for contemporary Nigeria society. The book of Leviticus as a unto would be accessed, along with examining critical questions like: what social-ethical injunctions were givens in Leviticus? Are those social ethical injunction revelation for contemporary society? If they are, how can they be applied in contemporary Nigeria society? All these questions would be exposed as to the rudiments of what this article seeks to communicate.

**Key-Words:** Social Ethics, Yahweh, Leviticus, Relevance, Nigeria

## Introduction

The book of Leviticus is described by the Mishnah (1969) as a book relaying information about "Priests", "Priest's law", "Priests' book" or "the law of the offerings (Harrison, R.K, (1969). Leviticus is a book about limit i.e boundaries as it has been postulated by Gary North (1994) that it contains a lot of boundaries laid down of which some are liturgical, others are familiar, some are tribal while some are dietary.

It is expected to note that Leviticus is one book that the critic is categorically convinced should not be in the Bible, as it is regarded as archaic and difficult to comprehend. A humanist called Dr. John Haynes Holmes (1964) once asserted that "the Book of Leviticus is not fit to be included in the Bible". However, in contradiction to this extremely biased opinion, others with equal scholarship find the Book of Leviticus to be a very important book and among them are; Dr. S. H. Kellogg (1908) who called Leviticus, "the greatest Book in the Bible", Andrew Bonars (1852) also reiterated this assertion as he noted that:

"There is no book in the whole compass of that inspired Volume which the Holy Spirit has given us, that contains more of the very words of God than Leviticus. This is because God has been shown to be the direct Speaker in almost every page." Andrew Bonar (1852).

All these propositions show the importance of the book of Leviticus.

The name Leviticus has been chosen because the book's 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. This made the Greek translators of the Pentateuch devised the name "Levitikon". Gordon J. Wenhan

(1979) said the Talmud also for similar reasons calls Leviticus “the law of the Priests”, while the Jewish writers in general are content with a simpler title transliterated as “Vayikra” denoting the book that begins with the words, “And the Lord called”.

On the issue of authorship, the mosaic authorship which is circa 1400 – 1200BC has been long accepted by most evangelicals, with one variety of explanations from later editors or compilers. All these show that the Book Leviticus is not without credibility.

Moreover, in many ways, the book of Leviticus is also known to be both a book of worship and a book of condemnation. This is shown in its (Leviticus) language of worship which began in Leviticus and runs through the rest of the Tanak (Joseph, S. Excell, 1887).

### **An Abridged Division of the Book Leviticus**

The article tends to present the division of the book of Leviticus in three parts which are written as follows;

- The first part explains the Law of Sacrifices (Leviticus 1 – 7) where the general rules for sacrifices are mentioned ranging from laws pertaining to burnt offerings (Leviticus 1), oblation or meat offerings (Leviticus 2), peace offerings (Leviticus 3), sin offering (Leviticus 4 -5:13) and trespass offerings (Leviticus). This was followed by the special instructions chiefly for the priests as found in Leviticus 6:8-7:38, the consecration of the priest, the entrance of Aaron and his son into their priestly offices and the punishments of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 8 – 10).

It also unveils the law of purity in Leviticus 11 – 15 and everything in the first part talks about man’s approach to God

- The second part of the book of Leviticus (Leviticus 17 – 26), examines the continuation of man’s communion with God as various laws were given
  - (a) Holiness on the part of the people (Leviticus 17 – 20) which includes, holiness in regard to food (Leviticus 17), Holiness of the marriage relation (Leviticus 18), Holiness of conduct towards God and man (Leviticus 19) and punishments for unholiness (Leviticus 17-26).
  - (b) Holiness on the part of the Priests and holiness of the offerings given (Leviticus 21- 22)
  - (c) The sanctification of feasts (Leviticus 23 – 25), which relays, laws about the Sabbath and annual feasts (Leviticus 23), Laws on holy lamps and showbread (Leviticus 24:1-9), the punishments of a blasphemer (Leviticus 24:10 – 23) and laws on the sabbatical and jubilee years (Leviticus 25).
- The third part of the division gives the conclusion which contains different promises and threats (Leviticus 26) aimed at ensuring that Israelites follow duly what Yahweh has commanded them to do. Further instructions were given in Leviticus 27 to emphasize on what has been conveyed in the preceding chapters.

All the information examined above are needed in order to create an objective path in accessing the book of Leviticus and bringing it into the context of unveiling the relevance of Yahweh’s social-ethics for contemporary Nigeria Society.

### **An Appraisal of the Name Yahweh**

Yahweh is the name of the state god of the ancient kingdom of Israel and later, the kingdom of Judah. His name is composed of four Hebrew consonants “YHWH” known as Tetragrammaton, which the prophet Moses is said to have revealed to the people.

The meaning of the name Yahweh has been interpreted as “He who makes that which Has been made”, or “He who brings into existence whatever Exists”. Although, the Biblical narratives depict Yahweh as the sole creator God meaning the Lord of the universe and God of the Israelites, yet initially Yahweh seems to have been Canaanite in origin and subordinate to the supreme god El.

In tracing the origin of the name Yahweh from extra-biblical sources, Kerrigan (2018) observes that “Mesha Stele” which is also referred to as the Moabites stone was known to have had the oldest mention of the name Yahweh. This ancient stone was erected by king Mesha of Moab to celebrate his victory over Israel in C. 840 BCE.

However, after the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE and especially from the 3rd century BCE on, the Jews ceased to use the name Yahweh for two salient reasons. The first being that, as Judaism became a universal religion rather than a local one, the more common Hebrew noun Elohim (God) tended to replace Yahweh to demonstrate the universal sovereignty of Israel’s God over all others. Secondly, the divine name was increasingly regarded as too sacred to be uttered, thus, the tetragrammaton YHWH was replaced vocally in the Synagogue rituals by the word “Adonai” (My Lord), a term also translated as ‘kurios’ (Lord) in the Septuagint.

Also, in the late middle Ages, Christian Monks reverted to the use of the name Jehovah instead of Yahweh. This was also employed by Christian scholars in the Renaissance and Reformation periods. However, Biblical scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries changed back to using the form Yahweh in favour of Jehovah.

Furthermore, it is expedient to note that it is unclear exactly when Yahweh was first worshipped, how He was first worshipped or by whom. This position was supported by scholars like J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayer (1986), who evinced that the origins of Yahwism are hidden in mystery. However, Nissim Amzallag (2009) a scholar of Ben-Gurion University disagreed with J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayer (1986) that Yahweh’s origin is obscure, as he argues that the deity originally a god of the forge and patron of metallurgists during the Bronze Age (c. 3500 – 1200 BCE), who was also worshipped by other people in Canaan like the Edomites, the Kenites, the Moabites and the Midianites. Therefore, from the foregoing it could be asserted that there are different views or positions from scholars as to whether the origins of Yahweh in Israel are obscure or not.

In addition, as the worship of Yahweh evolved, Smith (2001) portends that dramatic transformation from what it had been in the early days of the Israelites in Canaan, as Yahweh was presented as a storm and warrior god or deity who leads the heavenly army against Israel’s enemies. This was further backed up from the Biblical passages like 1 Corinthians 9:7, Ephesians 6:11, Philippians 2:25, 2 Timothy 2:3-4 among others.

That Yahweh is to be revered, is a unanimous form of worship among the Jews and this was reflected in their dispositions to His laws and injunctions which were to be fully obeyed and passed down to subsequent generations.

### **The Relevance of Yahweh’S Social Ethics in Leviticus for Contemporary Nigerian Society**

There is no doubt that the Bible has much to say regarding social ethics, most especially, in its call to justice and righteousness in the Old Testament. Embedded in the book of Leviticus are various injunctions or laws which are designed to create a just and merciful society. These laws given by Yahweh have been termed Yahweh’s social ethics which He relayed to the people of Israel through Moses for a viable and stable society.

Also, it is expedient to know the meaning of the term used in this article for a proper understanding of the issues raised. In clarifying term, the word “Ethics” would be examined since one of the keywords (Social Ethics) under study is relating to it.

Ethics is the discipline that studies the moral life; it studies not only what is right and good thing to do but also the character and values of a person and the standards to use for judging the rightness or wrongness of society’s policies. The word “Ethics” came from the Greek words “ethica” and “ethicos” which denote “norms or customs or habits (Grenz, S. J, 1997). Having known that, “Social Ethics” could be defined as that which has to do with principles and guidelines that regulate corporate welfare within a society, specifically with regards to determining what is deemed right, just and noble.

Orderliness has been shown from the beginning of creation as that which Yahweh cherishes, the work of creation is a display of orderliness, yet Yahweh does not stop there, for throughout history it has also been revealed with undeniable facts that the people to whom Yahweh has chosen to be His own were always given salient guidelines in form of laws or injunctions in order to have a stable society rooted in orderliness.

The Book of Leviticus is a compendium of such salient guidelines which have been referred to as Yahweh’s social ethics, some of these guidelines would be examined in order to show its relevance for contemporary society. They are as follows;

- **The Equality of All Men**

In Leviticus 4, Yahweh spoke to Moses about the sin offering and the injunctions attached to it, in doing this a paramount idea was communicated which tends to show Yahweh as an egalitarian. Leviticus chapter 4 verses 3, 13, 22 and 27 recorded various classes of people in the time of Moses. The Priest (verse 3), the whole congregation (verse 13), the ruler (verse 22) and the common people (verse 27), it was stated there that every time any of these people sinned, they are all to give their sin offerings respectively irrespective of their statuses. The fact that the Priest is a mediator between Yahweh and the people does not mean the law would be bent for him, neither will the ruler; who happens to be the head of the community of the Israelites be exempted from the “due process” of restoration through the offering of sacrifices even though he is a ruler.

Yahweh shows that there is no distinction or partiality in dealing with them all before Him, everyone is equal to Him, no matter their statuses or positions.

This is a very important practice that must be imbibed or adopted in contemporary society, with respect to Nigeria society. There are countless number of cases where partiality or favouritism have clouded the administration/implementation of justice in our society; the less privileged ones pass through the torrent of the “due process” while the wealthy ones are exempted from experiencing such torrid circumstances, all these show the proclamation of inequality in our dealings as a nation.

There are fundamental Human Rights claimed to be exercised for all citizens, yet it is saddening to say that many people’s rights have been denied them because they have no resources to grease the palms of those ahead of them or their superior.

Yahweh's injunctions as relayed in Leviticus should be implemented in contemporary Nigeria Society, as it will help to usher in peace, unity and further enhance the stability of this Nation. If all citizens are treated equally, there will be order in the society.

- **Laws Against the Forceful Possession of Other People's Properties**

Yahweh warned Moses in Leviticus 6:1 – 4 about different things which can destroy human relationship if not guided against. Among such things are; using violent measures in usurping other people's properties especially in regards to their things kept in our custody or care; the act of deceit in our relationship to other people, false-swearing on things the person knows is wrong and other act of oppression done to one's neighbour. These acts are frowned at by Yahweh and anyone guilty of them was told to bring before the altar of Yahweh his trespass offering and also to restore all that he has violently and falsely taken from other people.

This attitude that Yahweh is instilling into Israelites via His injunctions would serve as a means of creating a sense of contentment among the people and also a sense of concern for their neighbour's total well-being.

In contemporary Nigeria society, where different oppressive measures have been used in denying other people of their possessions, diverse deceitful ways have been created to usurp people's properties or possessions. There are instances where the "will" (the documentation of a person's possession and the proper administering of such properties) of a dead man had been altered by those in possession of it to deny the rightful benefactors of such will. Lost items of other people that were found have been difficult to restore, most especially if it is monetary, due to the fact that many have been rendered incapacitated by the economy of the nation. All these attitudes or practices have led to the quagmire of governance, which has hindered the growth of our nation.

There is a need for contemporary Nigeria Society to re-access its system and employ the injunctions of Yahweh as laid down to Moses in Leviticus 6:1-4, so that the frustrating situations around us can be improved upon.

- **Laws Forbidden Sexual Offences and Child Sacrifices**

In as much as the society is full of people of both genders (male and female), there is bound to be emotional contacts of which sexual cohabitation is involved, which promotes procreation. However, Yahweh has also given guideline or injunction to curtail the abuse of such emotions. Leviticus 18:1-30 warns and forbids diverse sexual offences such as: sexual contact between close relatives which is also called incest, a son is forbidden to uncover the nakedness of his father's wife, while the father is warned against having carnal knowledge with the daughter of his son, his own daughter or the wife of his sons. These are regarded as abominations.

Moreover, a person is also forbidden to cohabit with his neighbour's wife as it will incur the wrath of Yahweh upon them and even upon their land. Yahweh also gave the people laws forbidden what is known in our contemporary society as homosexuality, it is not to be practiced among the people. Yahweh specially told Moses those involved in such practices are confused and should be stoned to death in order to curb such abomination of a male

sleeping with a male, and female sleeping with female (Leviticus 18:22-25 and Leviticus 20:13).

There are lots of psychological effects to these practices mentioned above not to talk of the religious and social implications, it destroys the self – esteem of those involved, respect for each other is lost for those involved in incest, it brings shame, discord and curses upon those engaging in such abominations.

In addition to the above, child sacrifices was also discouraged among the people of Israel as Yahweh forbids them from observing the practices of those foreign countries like Moab, Canaan, and Assyria who are found of allowing their children pass through the fire of Molech, also known as Moloch (Moloch is an ancient Ammorite deity worshipped by the Canaanites, Phoenicians and related cultures in North Africa and the Levant. It requests costly sacrifices which normally involves the offering of human). All these injunctions are given to instill sanity in their society and to guard against any form of passion that would destroy the order of their society.

In contemporary Nigeria society, sexual perversion is not a new issue, there are news of adults sexually harassing the minors (under-age), stories of incest filling the pages of the nation's newspapers, kidnappers picking children for human sacrifices and even parents using the children as prostitutes and settling them for financial gain. All these are abominations that have wrecked the morality, the orderliness, the heritage of our nation and its stability, thereby hindering its development. If contemporary Nigeria society would imbibe strictly the social ethics relayed through Yahweh's injunctions to Moses in Leviticus 18, the sanity of the nation as regards morality and the preservation of her heritage would be achieved.

- **Law Safeguarding Human Relationship**

The act of theft and lying is forbidden in Leviticus 19:11-12, Yahweh warns against defrauding neighbours (Leviticus 19:13), rendering unjust judgement which stem from show of respect of persons or partiality (Leviticus 19:15).

The habit of giving false weights and measures was also discouraged, as it incurs pain on the receiver of such action. The people of Israel were enjoined to tread on the path of justice where all they did would strengthen the bond of human relationships rather that break or destroy it. A strong relationship founded on love, unity, compassion and empathy is the backbone of any stable society, if the bond that should connect the people together is broken through what we do to each other, it will lead to the crumbling of such society.

In the contemporary Nigeria society, where there are different ethnic groups, different religious views and ideologies, a viable human relationship cannot be undermined. Hence, there is need for tolerance, empathy, peaceful co-existence of ideas which would help the nation. The questions are: how can all these be achieved if we keep stealing from each other? Defrauding one another? Perverting justice due to the respect of persons? Applying false weights and measures in our different transactions with one another? We should get a cue from the injunctions of Yahweh in Leviticus 19, in order to build a strong and viable nation whose human relationship will be established on trust, love and respect for one another.

- **Laws Regarding the Care for Strangers, The Poor and the Less Privileged**

Leviticus 25:35-39 records the guidelines Yahweh give to Moses for the people of Israel about the care for the poor, especially those of their household. The rich ones or wealthy ones are admonished to support the poor ones, they must not be left alone during the period of harvest, the farmers are enjoined not to harvest all their farm produce but to leave some behind intentionally in order to allow the poor or the less privilege pick them as supplies for themselves. All these are given by Yahweh so that those who are poor would not be overlooked or neglected in the society.

Provisions are also made for strangers in Leviticus 19, as Yahweh enjoined the people of Israel to remember the past (their slavery in Egypt) and how Yahweh delivered them and sustained them in the wilderness. In the same vein, Yahweh want them to show such measure of compassion unto foreigners and strangers. These would ensure peace in their society and also unity.

In a world where there are prejudices or racial discrimination, xenophobic attacks against foreigners in some known countries like South Africa, the book of Leviticus is an antidote for such callous and barbaric acts. In the contemporary Nigeria society, tribalism or ethnic confrontations are common; lack of tolerance and the presence of fatalism among religious adherents are prominent which has led to the massacre of innocent lives in our Nation. Nigeria Society should adopt the injunctions of Yahweh in Leviticus 19 which when duly, implemented would create room for development and the fostering of unity in our nation.

- **Law on Land Protection or Preservation**

The productiveness of a land revolves round how one is able to preserve it. Land is a massive gift of Yahweh to humanity, but if it is not properly handled, it will not yield productive results and if this happens many lives will be in danger.

To curb such occurrences, Yahweh aside from giving salient instructions on human relationships also gave out injunctions on the use of land so that it can yield optimally.

In Leviticus 25, Yahweh relayed a vital truth in preserving the productivity of the land by commanding the observances of rest in every 7<sup>th</sup> year after a particular land had been used for crop propagation. Yahweh allowed for consistent use of such land for agricultural purposes for six (6) years but on the seventh (7<sup>th</sup>), the law of “the Sabbath of rest” must be observed. This will give the land ample time to recuperate its extended nutrients so as to produce more in the next year of use. This was also shown in the Genesis account of creation where Yahweh having worked for six (6) days, rested on the seventh day (7<sup>th</sup> day).

It is a truth or wisdom which must be imbibed in contemporary Nigeria society in order to help the protection or preservation of our land most especially those used for agricultural purposes. The use of fertilizers to boost the productivity or rapid growth of the crops has not yielded positive health results for the citizens, due to the adverse effect of those fertilizers in the body of those who had eaten of its produce. The adoption of the law of the Sabbath of rest would help our productivity in terms of food and preserve our lands.

All these injunctions if followed would not only assist our nation but would make it a model for others around us.

## **Conclusion**

This article has been able to examine the Book of Leviticus, looking briefly at the argument raised over the books among scholars, and also showing its relevance for contemporary Nigeria society.

It is so glaring that the social ethics of Yahweh which are the laws or injunctions relayed to Moses in Leviticus are very relevant for our contemporary society such that if adopted or imbibed by the government, the Non-governmental organizations, and the citizens at large, our nation would be immensely helped.

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