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atonement IN THE PENTATEUCH

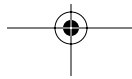
"It Is the Blood That Makes Atonement for One's Life"

Emile Nicole

In Christian theology the concept of atonement, and more specifically substitutionary atonement, is closely related to the sacrificial practice of Israel. The meaning of rites usually remains implicit in any given cultural system, which leaves open the possibility of various and conflicting interpretations. One well-known passage of Leviticus, however, lifts the corner of the veil,¹ explaining that blood must not be consumed because life is in it and God gave it "on the altar to make an atonement for your lives" (Lev 17:11). This cornerstone of the Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement has been subject these last decades to a growing tendency to replace the traditional understanding,² the most frequent interpretation proposed being

¹"Rarely does the Old Testament subject sacred things to such conscious interpretation," Erhard Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, OTL (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 240.

²Thirty years ago Jacob Milgrom reacted against an interpretation he judged uniform at the time and advanced the thesis that the blood upon the altar was offered as expiation for the death of the animal itself. To kill an animal for human food would be considered as murder unless such an expiation was presented to free the Israelite from this guilt, "A Prolegomenon to Leviticus 17:11," *JBL* 90 (1971): 149-56. The thesis was adopted by some commentators like Joshua R. Porter, *Leviticus*, CBC (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 139; John H. Hayes, "Leviticus," in *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 172; and, consistently, Milgrom himself in the first part of his monumental commentary, *Leviticus 1-16*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1,163 pages on chapters 1 to 16, and already 7 pages on the interpretation of Leviticus 17:11 (706-13). Refutation in Rolf Rendtorff, "Another Prolegomenon to Leviticus 17:11," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells*, Festschr. Jacob Milgrom





that the blood offered upon the altar would be considered as a life force purifying the one offering from the power of death.³ In this contribution, we intend to examine the main objections raised against the substitutionary interpretation of Leviticus 17:11. The first two sections of this chapter will deal with exegetical and more general theoretical objections. The third part will then examine the key issue of meaning of the verb *kipper* (כִּפֶּה), “to cover.”

Exegetical Objections

The translation of the preposition *bêt* (בֵּת) in the last part of Leviticus 17:11 in terms of price or exchange (the so-called *bêt* of price: “the blood makes atonement *for* the life”), transmitted by the Septuagint,⁴ the Targum and the King James Version,⁵ is now abandoned by many modern versions⁶ and interpreters in favor of other solutions, like *bêt* of instrument⁷ or *bêt* of essence.⁸

To make the question as clear as possible, a substitutionary understanding of the entire verse does not necessarily depend on the trans-

(Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 27-28; Adrian Schenker, “Das Zeichen des Blutes und die Gewissheit der Vergebung im Alten Testament. Die sühnende Funktion des Blutes auf dem Altar nach Leviticus 1.10-12,” in *Text und Sinn im Alten Testament* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1991), 174; Richard E. Averbeck, “כִּפֶּה,” in *NIDOTTE 2* (1997): 694-95.

³Cf. René Peter-Contesse and John Ellington, *A Handbook on Leviticus, UBS Handbook Series* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1990), 267: “It is because blood carries life that the priest can use it in the ritual of pardoning sins.” Truly, in recent commentaries like that of John Hartley, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), or Erhard Gerstenberger, OTL (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996), the substitutionary interpretation is not ruled out, but rather it is associated with the life-force interpretation. Gerstenberger writes: “The background to these blood rites apparently involves legal considerations. Life forfeited through guilt—namely that of the one offering—is redeemed from the warranted punishment through the presentation of the life of another, ‘through life it effects atonement’ (Lev 17:11) would be the most precise expression of this doctrine. Of course, legal explanation by no means exhausts this phenomenon, since even the late collector of these sacrificial prescriptions is still influenced by ancient, even magical beliefs concerning the efficacy of blood” (242).

⁴Preposition *anti*: τὸ γὰρ αἷμα αὐτοῦ ἀντὶ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐξιλάσεται.

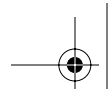
⁵KJV: “it is blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.”

⁶Among the main modern translations, NIV: “it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life” and NJB (1985): “blood is what expiates for a life” look like exceptions.

⁷NASB: “it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement,” RSV: “it is blood that makes atonement by reason of the life.”

⁸NEB: “It is blood, that is the life, that makes expiation”; *Living Bible*: “it is blood that makes the atonement because it is life”; NRSV (1993): “for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement”; the translation in *The JPS Commentary (Leviticus, 1989)*: “it is blood, as life, that effects expiation.” The German modern translation seems to combine *bêt* of essence and of price: “Weil im Blut, das Leben ist, schafft es Sühne für verwirktes Leben” *Die Bibel im heutigen Deutsch* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1982).





lation of this last clause. The two preceding propositions in the first part of the verse, "I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar," clearly imply some kind of substitution. Modern interpreters who nevertheless would not attribute a substitutionary force to the preposition *bêt* in the last clause have acknowledged this.⁹ But in this case, the substitutionary interpretation would depend on the meaning of the verb *kipper*, something that is not so easily demonstrated, as will be shown in the last part of this study. If the substitutionary meaning of preposition *bêt* in the last clause could be proved possible or more probable, the corresponding meaning of the verb *kipper* would be better substantiated.

Alongside a priori opposition to the concept of substitutionary atonement,¹⁰ one major objection has been raised against the traditional interpretation when used with the verb *kipper*, that is, that the preposition *bêt* always introduces the means by which an action is performed,¹¹ or, in two instances (Lev 6:23; 16:27), the place where it is performed. Strong support can thus be cited for the majority instrumental understanding of the preposition: "blood makes atonement *by* the life (of the animal)."¹² Such a case can be strengthened by the observation that *bêt-pretii* would not, strictly speaking, support the translation "for the life (of the one offering)." The price could only be the life of the animal, not of the worshiper!

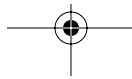
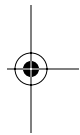
Thus, three distinctive arguments can be stated as follows, to which a fourth can be added: (1) an instrumental use of preposition *bêt* is the most frequent; (2) with the verb *kipper*, it is the only convenient option between the two otherwise attested; (3) an appeal to *bêt-pretii* implies a confusion between the price paid and the object acquired by the trans-

⁹Especially Baruch Schwartz, "The Prohibitions Concerning the 'Eating' of Blood in Leviticus 17," in *Priesthood and Cult*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 34-66, who argues very thoroughly to establish the substitutionary meaning of the phrase *kipper 'al nefes* (55-59), although he understands the preposition *bêt* as instrumental (47-48).

¹⁰Cf. the remark of Baruch Schwartz: "It should be noted that one of the reasons scholars have labored so arduously at proposing other interpretations of how blood serves על־נַפְשֵׁי־יִכְוֹם and have often ignored the obvious derivations from לְכַפֵּר have been their reluctance to admit that the idea of vicarious sacrifice . . . might be at work here," in *ibid.*, 57.

¹¹In sacrificial context: the animal or a part of it, such blood (Num 35:33). In other contexts: present (Gen 32:20), goodness (Prov 16:6).

¹²Cf. NASB: "it is blood that by reason of the life that makes atonement"; John Hartley, *Leviticus*, 261: "it is blood that makes atonement by the life."





action; and (4) the statement “blood atones *for* the life” would merely duplicate the preceding sentence “I have given it . . . to make an atonement for your souls.”

The first two arguments, founded on frequency, speak in terms of probability. In any given example, without consideration of other possible elements, the preposition *bêt* with the verb *kipper* is very probably instrumental. But this does not preclude the possibility of other meanings, especially if, in the sentence structure or the immediate context, there are serious reasons to suspect that the most frequent meaning would not be appropriate.

The third argument must be considered. In logical terms, the price ought not to be confused with the object of purchase.¹³ Nevertheless, in contexts of buying or exchanging, biblical Hebrew uses the same preposition *bêt* not only for the price paid but also for the object acquired. This can be clearly seen in the eighteenth edition of Gesenius’s dictionary, meaning II.5.b: “*for*, to indicate the price as means of purchase (the \beth *pretii*). . . inversely, the thing acquired can also be introduced by \beth .”¹⁴ Three of the examples listed are quite convincing: Lamentations 1:11, “they barter their treasures *for* food (\beth בְּאֶכֶל)”; 2 Samuel 3:27, “he died *for* the blood of Asael”;¹⁵ and the famous “life *for* life” in Deuteronomy 19:21, where the preposition *taḥat* (תַּחַת) of Exodus 21:23 and Leviticus 24:18 is replaced by *bêt*. Though less clearly, this particular use is also present in the other important lexicons: *HALOT*, meaning 17, “price or value” cites also Deuteronomy 19:21; *DCH*, meaning 10, notes, “at the cost of, at the risk of, in exchange *for*.”¹⁶ Several examples are particularly convincing, notably Genesis 29:18 “I’ll work for you seven years *for* Rachel (\beth בְּרַחֵל).” *BDB* presents the phenomenon in a slightly different way: “cost or price, whether given or received,” meaning number 3.

The reality is somewhat more complex, involving two subjects and

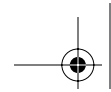
¹³Note the confusion in *NIDOTTE* vol. 2, 1997, 697: “*b* of price, meaning that the blood is the price for ransoming the soul of the person who offers it.” It is not the word *blood* (the price) that is introduced by preposition *bêt*, but the soul ransomed by it.

¹⁴“Für, um zum Angabe des Preises als Erwerbsmittel (das herk. \beth *pretii*. Umgekehrt, kann auch das zum erwerbende mit \beth eingeleitet werden),” *Wilhelm Gesenius Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, 18^e ed. Udo Rütterswörden, vol. 1, **§** - \beth (Berlin: Springer, 1987).

¹⁵That is: in exchange for, to pay off the blood debt caused by the death of Asael.

¹⁶Italics added.





two objects: (1) A gives x to B and receives y from him, or (2) B receives x from A and gives him y in exchange. When A buys y from B, x is the price given by A and received by B, but for A, y is not a price received. In the examples listed above, the preposition *bêt* is not used for x but for y , and with A being the explicit or implicit subject. This would also be the case in Leviticus 17:11. It must also be observed that different kinds of transactions are considered: purchase, exchange (Lam 1:10), compensation (Deut 19:21) and even blood revenge (2 Sam 3:27). If this be the case, is not substitutionary atonement a possibility?

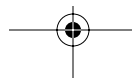
Whatever the problems of grammatical vocabulary, such as *bêt-pretii*,¹⁷ a substitutionary use of the preposition is rather well documented. The absence of other occurrences of such a construction with the verb *kipper* is not an insurmountable obstacle. If such a translation be possible, does a substitutionary use of preposition *bêt* in Leviticus 17:11 become necessary? An instrumental use of the preposition would create a logical difficulty. The obvious subject of the verb *kipper* is "blood." Therefore, "life" would be an agent of the action. In this context, "blood" and "life" are so closely related that it can be said that "life is in the blood" (Lev 17:11) and even "life is blood" (Lev 17:14). That being the case, to state that blood atones *by* life becomes a tautology.

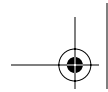
Some scholars would argue that since life is in the blood (Lev 17:11), it may be understood as the agent of purification active in the blood rite: "Blood atones *by* the life *which is in it*."¹⁸ This inference from "life is in the blood" nevertheless departs from the common experience that was probably at the origin of the saying. The life of an animal is in its blood as long as it is alive. When it dies, life departs from it as the blood flows out of its body. The same is true of human beings. Blood poured out, far from being the power of life, is a sign and sometimes the actual cause of death.¹⁹ Life endangered or lost is very close to death. When

¹⁷Some would prefer beth of exchange, cf. Henri Cazelles, *VT* 8 (1958): 315.

¹⁸Ibn Ezra comments: "בנפש שיש בו יכפר," *The Commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra on the Pentateuch*, vol. 3, *Leviticus* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1986), נ [53].

¹⁹"Since bleeding is the way in which slaughtered creatures and murdered humans were seen to die, this was the most logical way of saying what it was made them to die: the loss of blood. The statement is no innovation, no great discovery, it is certainly no abstract theological principle or statement of belief. The text is merely trying to make use of a well-known fact in order to ground its explanation for the prohibition of eating blood" (Schwartz, "Prohibitions Concerning the 'Eating' of Blood," 49-50).





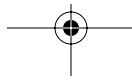
the psalmist complains that his enemies “seek my life,” it could be more appropriate to translate: “seek my death,” at least in the French language, where “*danger de mort*” (literally: “danger of death”) is the exact equivalent of English “danger of life” or German *Lebensgefahr*. With regard to death, the Old Testament is ruthlessly down-to-earth. The first part of verse 11 (“life is in the blood”) cannot support a magical interpretation for its last part: the blood of the victim cannot be a power of life to cleanse the worshiper.

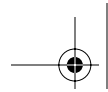
Would the proposition be a mere duplication of the preceding one? Two distinctive features differentiate the last proposition from the first part of the sentence: the absence of a personal suffix attached to the word (*nepes̄* נַפְשׁ), and the prefixed preposition (*bě* instead of [‘]*al* [עַל]).

The absence of the suffix endows the statement with a more general nature, which corresponds exactly to the function of the proposition introduced by the causal *kî* (כִּי). It is here that the explanation or confirmation can be found that blood indeed makes atonement for life: “I have given it . . . to make atonement for *your* lives, *because* blood makes atonement for life.” The strengthening of the word *blood* by the personal pronoun (*haddām hū’* הַדָּם הוּא׳), *blood itself, blood indeed*) follows the same intention. The word order of the proposition confirms this interpretation: (1) the subject, which begins the sentence and is reinforced by the pronoun “blood itself”; (2) the complement “for life”; and (3) the verb “makes atonement.” If the intention were to stress the power of life active in the blood, the word *life* would have to be found at the beginning: “It is by life that blood makes atonement.” On the contrary, there are two clear indications (the priority of the word *blood* reinforced by the pronoun), which prove that an instrumental understanding of *beth* is an obvious mistake.

But why then the preposition *bě* instead of [‘]*al*? The preposition [‘]*al* most commonly accompanies the verb *kipper* to designate the beneficiary of the rite. The uncustomary use of the preposition *bě* allows the possibility of the substitutionary nature of the act. Described as the beneficiary in the first part of the verse (preposition [‘]*al*), the life (*nepes̄*) of the worshiper is now considered as the object of the substitution: the poured-out life (*dām* דָּם) of the sacrificial victim is substituted *for* the life of the worshiper.

A very strong exegetical case can thus be made for a substitutionary





reading of the verse. Nevertheless, several objections have been raised on another level and will be dealt with in the following section.

Theoretical Objections

Notker Füglister has presented a detailed list of objections to a substitutionary reading of this verse.²⁰ Before each objection is individually examined, the entire list will be summarized.

1. In OT law, sin offering²¹ was provided only for unwilling or minor faults, never for a crime that entailed the death penalty. Why then substitute the life of an animal for someone who was not condemned to death?
2. In the performance of sin offerings, there was no rite that symbolized the transfer of sin as on the Day of Atonement when the high priest laid “both hands on the head of a live goat and confessed over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel” (Lev 16:21).
3. All offerings, and especially sin offerings, were considered as most holy (Num 18:9). How could this be the case if the animal sacrificed were a substitute for the sinner?
4. If substitution was the working principle of sacrifice, how could a simple meal offering be accepted for sin offering (Lev 5:11)?
5. The blood of the animal, rather than its death, was emphasized in the sacrificial rite.

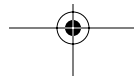
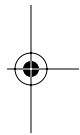
The first of these objections is assuredly the most impressive; an indisputable but often ignored fact. It is surprising that this characteristic limitation of OT sacrificial system remained unnoticed by NT writers who, like the author to the Hebrews, would have had a special interest in pointing out such limitations to highlight the insuperable value of the sacrifice of Jesus.²² The catalog of the various offenses demanding sin offerings clearly limits them to unwilling or minor offenses.²³ Numbers 15:29-31 plainly states that forgiveness through sacrifice was limited to sins of ignorance, whereas deliberate

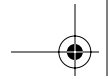
²⁰Notker Füglister, “Sühne durch Blut - Zur Bedeutung von Leviticus 17.11,” in *Studien zum Pentateuch*, ed. Georg Braulik (Festschr. Walter Kornfeld; Wien: Herder, 1977), 143-44, 146-47.

²¹תִּשְׂרֹף and קָטַר.

²²Sacrifices had to be presented again and again (Heb 10:1-4); all priests were subject to death (Heb 7:23), infected by sin (Heb 7:26-28), etc.

²³Leviticus 4:1—5:19.





transgressions remained liable to divine revenge or human justice.²⁴ The well-known example of David confirms these provisions: being guilty of a doubly deadly offense, he could not be permitted to offer any sin offering and could only commit himself to the sole and free mercy of God (Ps 51:18 [16]).

This objection finds its strength in the inequality between the real and the symbolic penalty that would result from a substitutionary understanding of sacrifice: death as a symbol would be out of proportion with the real guilt. Such disproportion appears even more offensive in our present cultural context, where the death penalty is less acceptable and higher value is placed on the life of animals.

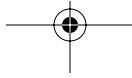
First of all, it must be observed that sacrifice does not appear in OT primeval history as a divine command but rather as a human initiative. Abel, without any previous instruction, took the initiative to offer fat portions from the firstborn of his flock (Gen 4:4). After the flood, Noah chose to make burnt offerings from every pure animal (Gen 8:20). This is confirmed by the widespread usage of sacrificial practices throughout the primitive cultures of the world. It was not God who first of all demanded that animals would be killed, but it was man, used to killing animals for food and having the feeling that the death of an animal was not a trivial thing and was somehow related to divinity, who made slaughter an act of worship or at the least linked it to cultic activity. Given this fact, the purpose of sacrificial regulations in the Pentateuch was not to impose sacrificial practice upon a people who previously ignored it but to submit an already existing practice to the proper understanding of the relationship between God and his people.²⁵ It is in such a perspective that the connection between sin and sacrifice observed in the OT law as well as the surprising disproportion pointed out earlier are to be correctly understood.

The OT connection between sin, remission and sacrifice, considered by the author of the letter to the Hebrews as a typical feature of the system,²⁶ is modified by a twofold and rather disturbing limitation: the main and most frequent offerings (burnt offerings and fellowship of-

²⁴One can hesitate over the exact implication of the expression *נכרת מקרב עמו*, lit. "to be cut off from one's people," but the impropriety of any sacrifice is clearly stated.

²⁵This would be carried out both by new dispositions and interpretative comments like Leviticus 17:11.

²⁶Cf. Hebrews 9:22: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."





ferings)²⁷ have no precise connection with sin and forgiveness; and the two rather uncommon offerings pertaining to the remission of a specific transgression (the so-called *sin* and *guilt offerings*) only deal with unwilling or minor offenses or with the cleansing of certain severe cases of impurity.²⁸

The core of the problem lies with the interpretation of this twofold limitation. Does this mean, as the above objection surmises, that the connection between sin and sacrifice implied by the principle of substitutionary atonement is overestimated or mistaken? There are clues that point in another direction. At least in one case, Leviticus 1:4, the verb *kipper* is used in connection with the holocaust offering. Placed at the beginning of the presentation of the first and most important sacrifice, this unique precision is certainly meaningful. Does it not suggest that all sacrifice, whether or not there be a connection with some particular sin, has to do with sin and forgiveness? This is confirmed by the observation that this unique use of the verb with the holocaust occurs in the same sentence in which the rite of laying one's hand on the head of the animal is mentioned: "He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him" (Lev 1:4).

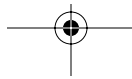
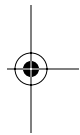
There no hint whatsoever that the considerations of Leviticus 17 pertaining to the use of blood in sacrifice and its atoning value were to be limited only to sin offerings.²⁹ On the contrary, since they were included in the general dispositions relative to the slaughter and eating of animals and they referred to the placing of blood on the altar, a common disposition for all sacrifices,³⁰ it reveals the atoning aspect present in all sacrifices, be they mandatory or voluntary.

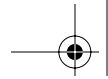
²⁷The first to be presented in the list of Leviticus 1—7, and the most frequently evoked in historical narratives.

²⁸Namely, severe skin disease (Lev 14:10-20), childbirth (Lev 12:6) and pathological discharges (Lev 15:15, 30).

²⁹Against Alfred Marx, *Les sacrifices de l'Ancien Testament, Cahiers Evangile* 111 (Paris: Cerf, 2000), 20. On the contrary, Jakob Milgrom (1997, 708-10) argues that Leviticus 17:11 concerns only fellowship offering. This is more in consonance with the context of Leviticus 17 but unduly restrains the scope of a rite that concerns all sacrifices, cf. next note.

³⁰Burnt offering (Lev 1:5, 11, 15), fellowship offering (Lev 3:2, 8, 13), sin offering (Lev 4:30), and guilt offering (Lev 5:9). Although the precise handling of the blood differs from one sacrifice to the other: sprinkling against the altar on all sides for the burnt and fellowship offerings, putting on the horns of the altar and pouring the rest at the base for sin offering, sprinkling against the side of the altar and draining the rest at the base for guilt offering, the contact of the blood with the altar is a constant of all sacrifices corresponding with the statement of Leviticus 17:11: "I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your lives."





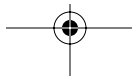
These observations lead us to another understanding of the limitation. Does it not pertain to the symbolic, limited, and, from a Christian point of view, provisional character of the OT system? If the Israelite had been allowed to compensate a capital offence by the blood (life-death) of an animal, would it not have scandalously minimized the gravity of sin and created an illusory confidence in a real efficacy of the sacrifice? The unmerited grace of God's forgiveness would have been reduced to a trivial scale of costs in which the payment of the corresponding sacrificial tax would free the guilty party from all charges. On the contrary, it was precisely unwilling or minor sin that was dealt with by a kind of sacrificial taxation, a reminder that all sin is deadly. The special role of blood in the main sacrifices, which did not pertain to any particular sin, would have reminded all worshipers that they were sinners whose very lives depended on God's forgiveness.

Leviticus 17:11 thus brings to the fore a general principle underlying the whole OT sacrificial system, whose practical carrying out was limited by the concern for the seriousness of sin, the freedom of God's forgiveness and the will not to reduce the moral dimension of human life to the mere repetition of a ritual. The apparent unseemliness signaled by the objection can be well explained in such a way. Having now dealt with Füglistner's first objection, the four others will be examined more briefly.

Why would the laying of one sole hand on the head of the sacrificed animal be less impressive or of a different nature than the laying on of both? Laying on of the hand necessarily entails some kind of identification. Füglistner claims that the laying on of one hand only meant on the part of the worshiper that the offering was really his own.³¹ But who could have doubted that? He brought it personally and would himself put it to death. It may be conceded that, unlike the particular ceremony of the Day of Atonement, where the symbol of the transfer of sin was obvious,³² the symbolism here was more general. But there can be no doubt that by this gesture the animal was presented as a substitute for the human being who offered it. It must be observed that whereas the confession of sin was made on the head of the famous scapegoat, this was only half of the ritual. A first goat, chosen by lot be-

³¹Füglistner, "Sühne durch Blut," 146.

³²Leviticus 16:21: "He [Aaron] is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head."





tween two, had to be previously slaughtered and offered as a sin offering for the people (Lev 16:15). The scapegoat represented the removal of sin, the sins being symbolically placed on the animal that took them away *into* the desert. It should not be forgotten that the fate of the first goat, “for the Lord” (Lev 16:8), represented, by its slaughtering and the handling of its blood, the atonement of sin through substitution.

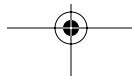
Füglister’s third objection concerns the flesh of the offerings, which had to be eaten as something *most holy* by the priests and their families (Num 18:10). In response, it must be observed that when the priests were not permitted to eat these same parts of sin-offerings,³³ they had to be taken outside of the camp and burned with the impure parts of the animal, that is, the entrails and the offal (Lev 4:11-12). The characterization of the flesh of these offerings as most holy did not imply that it had nothing to do with sin. This is obvious since they bore the very names of *sin-* and *guilt-*offerings. It pointed out rather that these offerings belonged to God and were only to be eaten by the priests and with proper reverence.³⁴

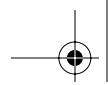
The provision of mere grain as sin offering (Lev 5:11-13) must be put back into proper perspective. It was an exception among exceptions! The normal rate for an ordinary member of the community was a female lamb or goat.³⁵ If somebody was too poor to afford a lamb, he was permitted to bring two doves or two young pigeons (Lev 5:7). It was only as a last resort, when someone was not even able to present the two birds, that he was allowed to offer fine flour as a sin offering. Once it is admitted that such a substitution was inevitably unequal (the life of the animal could not be considered equivalent to the life of man), it can be understood that in borderline cases of extreme poverty, a grain-offering could be substituted for a living being. In any case, the objection could well be turned back on those who uphold the cleansing power of blood. If this vital force was necessary to drive away sin, how could the burning of some fine flour on the altar bring about the same result? Why not use water instead, which in several cases of uncleanness was supposed to bring about purification (cf. Lev 15:5ff.)?

³³Because they have been offered by them in reparation for their own offenses. It would be scandalous if they would take benefit of their own offenses.

³⁴In Leviticus 10:17, sacredness of the sin offerings and sin itself are closely related: “It [sin offering] is most holy; it was given to you to bear the guilt of the community.”

³⁵Leviticus 5:6. Cf. also Leviticus 4:27-31 female goat and Leviticus 4:32-35 female lamb. Chiefs and priests are imposed a much more severe rate.





It is true that the slaughter of the animal was not said to be carried out by the priest.³⁶ Neither was there any special emphasis on this part of the ritual. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that in this case it is not question of a real, but rather of a symbolic substitution. The death of the animal was symbolically embedded in the ritual in the form of blood, which is clearly consistent within the system.

We thus come to the conclusion that none of the objections put forth by Füglistler can challenge the substitutionary interpretation of Leviticus 17:11. Conversely, very strong evidence can be opposed to the rival theory: if the blood of the victim were conceived as a purifying power of life, why would it be poured out on the side of the altar and not sprinkled on the one offering? Such a process was not unknown in OT ceremonial law. For instance, a sevenfold aspersion with blood was provided to symbolize the purification of healed lepers (Lev 14:7). But whereas the blood mentioned in Leviticus 17:11 would be “given, as God said, *for you*,” it was nevertheless not placed on the worshiper, but on the altar, which represented God’s “space.” What need would God have of such a purifying power of life? Only as acceptance of the death (blood) of the animal in place of the sinner who should have died, would the blood have any sense *for God*. It is highly significant that the sacrificial blood be described as given to man *by God* in a rite where precisely the opposite took place: man, who offered the sacrifice, gave it *to God* through the mediation of the priest. As many interpreters have noticed, this underlines the generous all-sufficiency of God: humans can only offer what he has already given to them.³⁷ Such a formulation also rules out any magical conception of the blood. Blood is reserved *for God*, even when used for man’s sake.³⁸ At



³⁶The Torah of Ezekiel sets clearly apart the Levites who may serve in the sanctuary. They may “slaughter the burnt offerings and sacrifices for the people and stand before the people and serve them” (Ezek 44:11) and by consequence of their sin “are not to come near any of my holy things or my most holy offerings” (Ezek 44:13). There is a clear-cut distinction between slaughter, which is the duty of the people, served by the Levites, and the priests who “are to stand before me [the Lord] to offer sacrifices of fat and blood” (Ezek 44:15).

³⁷Cf. 1 Chronicles 29:14: “Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.”

³⁸Even in the paschal rite, when blood was not to be poured on an altar but put on the doorframes of each individual house (Ex 12:7) and is presented as “a sign *for you*” (Ex 12:13), it would nevertheless be a sign *for God*: “when I see the blood, I will pass over you.” Israelites would not be protected by a power of life, which could avert the peril of death, but by a sign intelligible by God.





this point, it is now possible to deal with the key issue of the meaning of the verb *kipper*.

The Meaning of the Verb *kipper*

Does the verb *kipper* deal with purification or with substitution? Both cases may be substantiated by etymological considerations.³⁹ On the one hand, the well-known substantive *kōper* (כֹּפֶר), *ransom*, points to the idea of compensation; while on the other hand, the unique use of the verb in the qal stem with the hapax *kōper* (כִּפֶּר) II., *bitumen* (Gen 6:14) evokes a material process that could rather easily be linked with purification, since the gesture of washing is almost identical with distempering.⁴⁰

In the case of a word used so frequently in the OT (according to some sources 101 or 102 times), usage must prevail over any etymological or comparative considerations. Ritual use, by far the most frequent in the Old Testament⁴¹ and decisive in Leviticus 17, unquestionably sways the evidence in favor of purification. The strongest proof is the use of the verb where sacred things are the direct object of the verb.⁴² But it may also be said that the rite sometimes applies to human beings affected by some severe kind of defilement,⁴³ in which the result of the process is the recovery of a state of purity: “she/he will be clean.”⁴⁴

On the other hand, several occurrences of the verb indisputably link it to the notion of compensation. For instance, each census brought about the payment of a tax,⁴⁵ given to the Lord by each one to “atone

³⁹Cf. especially the monograph of Bernd Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen. Studien zur Sühnentheologie der Priesterschrift und zur Wurzel KPR im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament*, WMANT 55 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 14, 394; and Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord. A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 55-67, 121, 123-27.

⁴⁰Cf. in English, *whitewashing*. This could be related to Akkadian *kuppartu* “purification.”

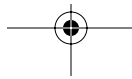
⁴¹It represents nearly 80 percent of all OT occurrences and more than 9 out of 10 in the Pentateuch.

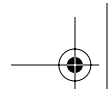
⁴²This use is rather scarce in the Pentateuch and limited to the ceremonies of *Yom kippur* with most holy place, the tent of meeting and the altar as direct object with particle אֵל (Lev 16:20, 33). Cf. the same use in Ezekiel 43:20, 26; 45:20.

⁴³Like childbirth (Lev 12:7, 8), skin disease (6 occurrences in Lev 14) and pathological discharges (Lev 15:15, 30).

⁴⁴Leviticus 12:7, 8; 14:20. Cf. also the prepositional phrase (prep. מֵ) indicating the uncleanness from which one is freed by the rite (Lev 14:19; 15:15, 30).

⁴⁵Named כֹּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ, *ransom of his life*, Exodus 30:12.





for his life."⁴⁶ Is it necessary to separate sacrificial (*purification*) from nonsacrificial (*ransom*) uses of the verb?

Many typical features of the sacrificial use of the verb indicate that the intent of the rite could not be reduced to some kind of purification: more often than defilement, sin is what makes the rite necessary;⁴⁷ more frequently than purification, forgiveness is shown to be the result of the act;⁴⁸ offerings closely linked with the rite of *kipper*, even in cases of uncleanness, are designated as sin (*ḥaṭā't* חַטָּאת) and guilt (*'āšam* אָשָׁם); and human beneficiaries of the rite, consistently mentioned, are never the direct object of the verb and very rarely the concrete object of a blood rite. The preposition *'al*, or more seldom *bē'ad* (בְּעַד), is used consistently to show the human being as beneficiary of an action, which was not performed *upon him*, as logically would be the case for purification, but for *his sake*, outside of him.

Therefore, in *kipper* rites, purification cannot be disconnected from compensation: through compensation given to God, purification and forgiveness were granted. Irrespective of various hypotheses that attempt to provide a genetic explanation for this rather disturbing connection,⁴⁹ it should be observed that it corresponds precisely to the close relationship between defilement and sin, which is typical of the old covenant in comparison with the new.

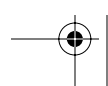
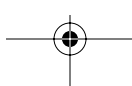
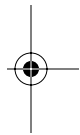
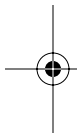
This connection is illustrated quite well by the ceremonies of Yom Kippur. All sacred places and furniture were to be decontaminated by a man wearing special clothes, almost like an atomic power station.

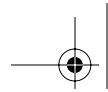
⁴⁶Exodus 30:15,16. לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם. This same phrase is used in Numbers 31:50 for the offering to the Lord of a part of the spoils by the Israelites after their victory over the Midianites. One could consider a half-shekel (Ex 30:15), a very low price in compensation for life. The owner of an ox reputed dangerous and responsible for the death of a slave would have to pay sixty times more, 30 shekels (Ex 21:32), but in some other instances the "atonement" could be more dramatic: Phinehas "made atonement for the Israelites" (Num 25:13) by killing an Israelite leader and a Midianite woman (Num 25:7-8), and after the golden calf apostasy, Moses intended to "make atonement" for the people (Ex 32:30) either by his prayer or by offering his own life in the place of the people (Ex 32:32).

⁴⁷Note the twelve occurrences for sin and guilt offerings in Leviticus 4—7.

⁴⁸Leviticus 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7; 19:22; Numbers 15:25, 28. There are 12 occurrences with verb forgive (נָסַח), 7 with verb purify (טָהַר).

⁴⁹Baruch Levine, after having established a logical relation between *purification* and *compensation*, "*kōper* is rather a payment made for the purpose of erasing or 'wiping away' guilt incurred by the offense" (61), surprisingly proposes that "biblical cultic texts reflects two distinct verbal forms: (1) *kipper* I, the primary *Piel*, and (2) *kipper* II, a secondary denominative, from the noun *kōper* "ransom, expiation gift" (67).





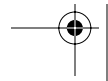
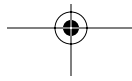
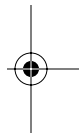
Thus, not only ritual impurity but sin itself was to be driven out like pollution in this graphic rite of the so-called scapegoat. But sin, even though closely linked to impurity, is not to be confused with, or reduced to, a kind of defilement. Humiliation and public confession were necessary (Lev 16:21, 31). Whereas sacred things and human beings are mentioned together as objects of the rite (Lev 16:33), a distinction is maintained between them in the verbal construction: direct object with the particle *ʾt* (אֶת) for the sacred things (“he makes atonement for [ʾt] the Most Holy Place, and for [ʾt] the Tent of Meeting, and for [ʾt] the altar he makes atonement”); the preposition *ʿl* (עַל) for the persons (“for [ʿl] the priests and for [ʿl] all the people of the community he makes atonement”). Since they were polluted objects, sacred things were direct objects of the rite performed *upon*⁵⁰ them for purification. In contrast, human beings need not only and primarily to be purified, but to be reconciled with God,⁵¹ which is symbolically represented by the blood rite, which takes place outside of them *upon* the altar.

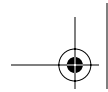
Therefore, even in a cultic context, it is not possible to limit the meaning of the verb *kipper* to a mere purification rite, since it is also linked to a compensation, which implies God. This sometimes disturbing connection between sin and defilement or forgiveness and purification observed in the use of the verb can be recognized as another typical limitation of the old covenant. The *kipper* rite provided a merely provisional representation of God’s forgiveness still embedded in its symbolic aspect of purification. A proper understanding of the relationship between the two testaments implies that one should not try to find the New Testament in the Old, but to read the signs in the Old Testament that point in the direction of the New.

Given the very real disproportion between animal and human life, it is possible to agree in part with Andrian Schenker, who proposed to trans-

⁵⁰This is clearly the meaning of the preposition *עַל* when used for the altar or sacred things upon which the blood rite is performed.

⁵¹The comparative study of Roy E. Gane, “Schedules for Deities: Macrostructure of Israelite, Babylonian and Hittite Sancta Purification Days,” *AUSS* 36 (1998), 231-44, points out that only in Israelite ritual would human beings be objects of the purification rite (243). In Babylon, the origin of pollution is extra-human. There is no question of sins; on the contrary, the king affirms his innocence. At Ebla also, in a ritual close to the scapegoat ritual, there is no confession of sin, cf. Ida Zatelli: “There is no confession by the imposition of hands in the Eblaite ritual, but loading the goat with impurities is the essential, primitive nucleus of the rite itself” (“The Origin of the Biblical Scapegoat Ritual: The Evidence of Two Eblaite Texts,” *VT* 48 [1998]: 262).





late the substantive *kōpēr* (*ransom*) as “accommodation.”⁵² He rightly observed that the price given could have no intrinsic connection with the offense, such as money given to avoid capital punishment in cases where the family of the victim accepted such compensation from the owner of a dangerous ox responsible for a mortal accident.⁵³ Acceptance of such accommodation is evidently a free act of God’s clemency. However, in the case where the accommodation provided is the blood of a slaughtered animal, to claim that it would be without connection with the guilt and merited punishment of the one offering it would suppose arbitrary and inexcusable violence on the part of God. The “noble” intention to avoid a “shocking” doctrine of God’s justice that demands the death of the guilty arrives therefore at the horrific conclusion of gratuitous sadism.

Conclusion

In the conclusion of his thorough analysis and critique of C. H. Dodd, Roger Nicole felt it necessary to clarify that propitiation ought not be understood “in a way that would seem to do injustice to the love, mercy and grace of God by representing him a vindictive being thirsty for man’s blood.”⁵⁴ We hope that this present study confirms for the reader Roger Nicole’s thesis stated forty-nine years ago (in relation to the OT):

The word כָּפַר, standing at the heart of the Hebrew sacrificial system, reveals that the worshipper felt the need of escaping the divine displeasure at sin. In this respect it appears to have had a basic propitiatory connotation, although the grammatical construction varies. The non-religious use of this verb confirms this (Gen 32:21; Prov 16:14).⁵⁵

We believe that a more careful study of the OT sacrificial system would help readers of this new century to understand its particularities and typical limitations as specific means to enhance, preserve and anticipate a concept of propitiation worthy of the justice, love, mercy and grace of the holy God.

⁵²Cf. his two articles in *Text und Sinn im Alten Testament* (Friburg: Universitätsverlag, 1991), “*Koper* et expiation,” 120-34, and “Das Zeichen des Blutes und die Gewissheit der Vergeltung im Alten Testament. Die sühnenden Funktion des Blutes auf dem Altar nach Leviticus. 17.10-12,” 167-85.

⁵³Exodus 21:30. Cf. also the census *tax* of a half-shekel (Ex 30:13), the *present* offered by Jacob to obtain the pardon of his brother Esau (Gen 32:21), the *incense* burned by Aaron to stop the plague in the people (Num 17:11 [16:46]), etc.

⁵⁴Roger R. Nicole, “C. H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation,” *WTJ* 17 (1955): 150.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 152.

