

The Unifying Logic of Israelite Purification Offerings Within Their Ancient Near Eastern Context

Roy E. Gane
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

Introduction

According to biblical narratives, burnt and well-being offerings preceded construction of the wilderness sanctuary, with the former as the original expiatory sacrifice (see, e.g., Exod 24:5; Job 1:5; 42:7-9).¹ Worship at the sanctuary, where the Lord's Presence resided, called for addition of the more specialized purification (so-called "sin") and reparation (so-called "guilt") offerings.² Purification offerings cleansed non-defiant moral faults and serious physical ritual impurities that could pollute the sanctuary. Reparation offerings remedied sacrilege against the divine Resident of the sanctuary by misuse of things that belonged to him, or of his holy name through a fraudulent oath.³

The present paper focuses on the purification offering in its ancient Near Eastern context. This kind of sacrifice was unique both within the Israelite ritual system and outside it. However, it brought together elements that had a variety of ancient Near Eastern analogies.

¹ Cf. Rolf Rendtorff, *Studien zur Geschichte des Opfers im alten Israel* (WMANT 24; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1967), 82-83.

² For the name "purification offering," see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 253-254.

³ *Ibid.*, 345-356.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

First I will identify elements of the Israelite sacrifice, then relate these to non-Israelite phenomena, drawing mainly from examples used in my “Leviticus” section of the Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary.⁴ Finally, I will reflect on the significance of the unique combination of elements in the purification offering.

Elements of the Israelite Purification Offering

Leviticus 4:22-26 provides a sample of a prescription for a purification offering, in this case on behalf of an Israelite chieftain. Key elements are italicized:

*^{4:22} If a chieftain sins by inadvertently doing something against any of the commands of the LORD his God concerning things that should not be done, and experiences guilt, ^{4:23} or his sin that he has committed is made known to him, he will bring his offering: a male goat without flaw. ^{4:24} He will press his hand on the head of the male goat and slaughter it at the place where he would slaughter a burnt-up offering before the LORD. It is a purification offering. ^{4:25} The priest will take some of the blood of the purification offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt-up offering. But he will pour the rest of its blood at the base of the altar of burnt-up offering. ^{4:26} He will turn all of its fat into smoke on the altar like the fat of the shared sacrifice of well-being. In this way the priest will purge for him from his sin, and he will be forgiven.*⁵

The occasion for the sacrifice is an inadvertent violation of a divine prohibitive commandment by an individual when he realizes that he has sinned. The overall function of the purification offering is to remove the sin from the person (“purge for him from his sin”; v. 26), prerequisite to divine forgiveness.⁶

The ritual process involves the priest placing two components of the animal victim on the Lord’s altar: blood and fat. Application of blood, representing life, to the altar represents token ransom for life (Lev 17:11).

⁴ Roy Gane, “Leviticus,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (ed. John H. Walton; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 1:284-337, especially on Lev 4-5, 16.

⁵ My translation, informed by the process of rendering Leviticus (as primary translator) for the *Common English Bible* (2011).

⁶ Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 106-143.

GANE: UNIFYING LOGIC OF ISRAELITE PURIFICATION OFFERINGS

Prominence of the blood on the horns, the highest parts of the altar, emphasizes this aspect. Such application of sacrificial blood to the horns of an altar is unique to the Israelite purification offerings (cf. 4:7, 18). The fat is burned as a token “food” portion to God “like the fat of the shared sacrifice of well-being” (v. 26). Whereas such fat of a well-being offering is an ^ʾ*iššeh*, “food gift” (3:3, 9, 14) this part of a purification offering is never an ^ʾ*iššeh*; rather, it represents a token “debt” payment.⁷

The purification offering removes an impediment to the divine-human relationship through token ransom and debt payment. It does not buy forgiveness, which is not automatic, and the price of which would be too high (Ps 49:7 [Heb. v. 8]). Rather, the Lord graciously accepts a token as an expression of repentance, if it is genuine (but see Isa 1 regarding hypocrisy), and completes the process of reconciliation by granting forgiveness.

The chieftain’s problem is sin = moral fault, for which he needs forgiveness. Elsewhere, purgation (*kipper*, traditionally rendered “atone”) through purification offerings can remove residual physical ritual impurities from persons so that they become “pure,” rather than forgiven (e.g., Lev 12:7-8; 14:19).⁸ Their purity restores their normal level of access to sacred things (e.g., 7:20-21).

There is tremendous variety among rituals labeled “purification offering.” Depending on their offerers and the evils they remedy, they could involve blood applications at the outer altar or inside the sacred Tent (Lev

⁷ The term ^ʾ*iššeh* is usually rendered “offering (made) by fire,” assuming that the Hebrew term derives from the word for “fire.” Weakening this idea, ^ʾ*iššeh* can refer to food portions that are eaten rather than burned (Deut 18:1), but it is not used of purification offerings, which are always burned. So scholars have found an alternative in an Ugaritic cognate that means “gift” (G. R. Driver, “Ugaritic and Hebrew Words,” *Ugaritica* 6 [1969]: 181–184). This concept fits the biblical contexts well: An offering is *given* to God, whether it is burned or not, and the purification offering is not a gift because it is a mandatory token payment of “debt” (Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 161–162, 253).

⁸ In Lev 12:6-8, a purification offering is paired with a burnt offering, which supplements the quantity of expiation to make what amounts to a larger purification offering (cf. 5:7-10; 9:7-14; 15:14-15, etc., with the purification offering actually performed first; Rolf Rendtorff, *Leviticus* [BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1985-1992], 3:177; Baruch Levine, *Leviticus* [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 29; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 304; Roy Gane, *Ritual Dynamic Structure* [Gorgias Dissertations 14, Religion 2; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004], 151-152).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

4:3-21), lesser offerings of birds (paired with burnt offerings; 5:7-10), a substitute of grain for a poor person (vv. 11-13), or even performance outside the Israelite camp (Num 19:1-10).

Once a year on the Day of Atonement, blood of special purification offerings on behalf of the priests and the lay community was to purge the sanctuary of the impurities and sins that had accumulated there throughout the year (Lev 16). Except for rebellious sins (pl. of *peša'*; v. 16), these evils had come to affect the sanctuary through its contact with purification offerings, which had removed sins and impurities from offerers (Lev 6:27-28 [Heb. vv. 20-21]).⁹ The Day of Atonement was Israel's judgment day, when loyal Israelites were morally "cleansed"/vindicated as a result of the sanctuary's purgation (Lev 16:30) and disloyal ones were condemned (23:29-30).¹⁰

The common denominator unifying the "purification offering" category was the function to purge sins or physical ritual impurities from persons or sacred objects and precincts.¹¹ Except for the grain substitute (Lev 5:11-13) and the red cow ritual outside the camp (Num 19:1-10), purification offerings included both application of blood to part of the sanctuary and offering a creature (quadruped animal or bird) as food for God.

Analogous Elements in Non-Israelite Rituals

The building blocks of the purification offering existed outside Israel, where ancient Near Eastern peoples employed ritual remedies for offenses against their gods and purified persons, objects, and places. They also offered food and other items to placate their deities. Some religious cultures attest ritual manipulation of blood for purification. The following subsections provide examples.

⁹ See Gane, *Cult and Character*, 165-181.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 305-323.

¹¹ For the idea that the great variety of purification offerings constitute a ritual "super-paradigm," see Gane, *Ritual Dynamic Structure*, 112-113. Azazel's goat was a "purification ritual," but not a "purification offering" because it was an elimination ritual rather than a sacrifice to YHWH (Gane, *Cult and Character*, 258-261).

Remedies for Offenses Against Gods

Ancient Near Easterners believed that their deities held them accountable to standards of conduct and could negatively affect their lives if they violated these.¹² So those who knew they had committed wrongs, or whose suffering indicated that they were out of divine favor for some reason, could seek reconciliation through sacrifices or other means. For example, a Mesopotamian eloquently expressed his restoration as follows:

In the “Gate of Release from Guilt” I was released from my bond.
In the “Gate of Praise(?)” my mouth made inquiry.
In the “Gate of Release from Sighing” my sighs were released.
In the “Gate of Pure Water” I was sprinkled with purifying water.
In the “Gate of Conciliation” I appeared with Marduk,
In the “Gate of Joy” I kissed the foot of Sarpani-tum.
I was consistent in supplication and prayer before them,
I placed fragrant incense before them,
An offering, a gift, sundry donations I presented,
Many fatted oxen I slaughtered, butchered many [sheep?].
Honey-sweet beer and pure wine I repeatedly libated.
The protecting genius, the guardian spirit, divine attendants of the
fabric of Esagila,
I made their feelings glow with libation,
I made them exultant [with] lavish [meals].
[To the threshold, the bolt] socket, the bolt, the doors
[I offered] oil, butterfat, and choicest grain.
[] the rites of the temple.¹³

¹² Like Leviticus 16, the Sumerian Nanshe Hymn (c. 2100–2000 B.C.) expresses the concept that human beings would be annually judged by their deity. The Hymn describes a New Year celebration at which the goddess Nanshe is portrayed as holding a yearly review of persons economically dependent on her temple. Depending on whether they were faithful in observing her ritual and ethical standards throughout the year and in coming to her temple to participate at the New Year, she would renew or terminate their contracts.

¹³ William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 1997-), 1.153: 491. Cf. prayers of the Hittite emperor Muršili II, who entreated the gods to forgive and to end the suffering of a deadly epidemic that ravaged his people. He refers to a number of expiatory and propitiatory rituals and gifts that the gods had received from him and his people, including offerings of bread and libations (*ibid.*, 1.60: 157-159).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Restoring a divine-human relationship could involve acknowledgment of wrongdoing through confession (cf. Lev 5:5—before a purification offering). Thus, a prayer to Marduk includes the words:

I am surely responsible for some neglect of you,
I have surely trespassed the limits set by the god.
Forget what I did in my youth, whatever it was,
Let your heart not well up against me!
Absolve my guilt, remit my punishment,
Clear me of confusion, free me of uncertainty. . .¹⁴

A just and merciful deity could forgive.¹⁵ However, divine expectations and reactions were not always clear and consistent, and there were many gods as well as demons. Consequently, sorting out the variables to identify a successful solution often required divination,¹⁶ which was not always successful.¹⁷

For Israelites, divination was unnecessary because several factors greatly simplified reconciliation with the Lord, taking away uncertainty and fear:

1. With monotheism there was no need to determine which deity to approach.
2. Sin that required a ritual remedy was defined as violation of a command that the Lord had communicated to the Israelites.
3. Israelites who committed inadvertent wrongs were liable for offering purification offerings only when they came to know what they had done wrong (Lev 4:14, 23, 28; but see on 5:17).

¹⁴ Ibid., 1.114: 416. A Sumerian poem of confession and reconciliation shows several important points of contact with biblical teaching regarding the sinful nature of the present human condition, need for recognition of sins, distinctions between sins in terms of whether they are recognized/visible or forgotten, and the value of sincere (rather than artful) confession and supplication in gaining reconciliation with the deity so that joy rather than punishment results (ibid., 1.179: 574–575; cf. Ps 51); cf. W. G. Lambert, “*dingir.ša dib.ba* Incantations,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 33 (1974): 275, 281, 283, 285, 287.

¹⁵ Hallo and Younger, *Context of Scripture* (hereafter COS), 1.153: 490; cf. 487.

¹⁶ COS, 1.78: 205; cf. 204.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1.60: 160; cf. 157.

GANE: UNIFYING LOGIC OF ISRAELITE PURIFICATION OFFERINGS

4. A limited number of ritual types (burnt, purification, and reparation offerings) were prescribed to remedy a wide range of offenses.

Ritual Purification

Many cultures have treated genital discharges, including those involved in menstruation and childbirth, as causing impurity that requires ritual remedies (cf. Lev 15).¹⁸ For example, a Hittite birth ritual text requires a sacrifice on the seventh day after birth and says that a male infant is pure by the age of three months, but a female is pure at four months.¹⁹

As in pentateuchal ritual law, physical ritual impurity could disqualify a non-Israelite from access to sacred things. Thus, the Hittite “Instructions to Priests and Temple Officials” prohibit cultic functionaries from defiling sancta (on pain of death for a kind of intentional violation; compare Lev 22:9) by approaching sacrificial loaves and libation vessels without bathing after sexual intercourse.²⁰

Like the Hittites, the Israelites also used ablutions to remedy minor physical ritual impurities (e.g., Lev 15) and sacrifice for major impurities.²¹ Israelite impurities resulted from human and some animal sources, but other peoples believed that their rituals could interact with dangerous demonic impurity. So a Hittite law warns: “If anyone performs a purification ritual on a person, he shall dispose of the remnants (of the ritual) in the

¹⁸ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 763–765; Gary Beckman, *Hittite Birth Rituals*, 2d ed. (StBoT 29; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983), esp. 251.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135, 137, 143, 219. As in Lev 12, there is a week-long initial period of impurity, and purification of a girl takes longer (compare vv. 4–5). Regarding a plausible reason for this, see Jonathan Magonet, “‘But If It Is a Girl She Is Unclean for Twice Seven Days. . .’: The Riddle of Leviticus 12.5,” in *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas*, ed. J. Sawyer (JSOTSup; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 152. Whereas the Hittite process has to do with the baby’s impurity, Leviticus is concerned with that of the mother. The Hittite sacrifice is offered at the end of the first week, but Israelite sacrifices come after the entire period of purification.

²⁰ *COS*, 1.83: 220; John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 2000), 130.

²¹ On ablutions in Israel against their ancient Near Eastern background, see Roy Gane, “Ablutions,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (ed. Hans-Josef-Klauck et al; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009) 1:108-112.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

incineration dumps. But if he disposes of them in someone's house, it is sorcery (and) a case for the king."²²

As the Israelites did on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16), other ancient Near Easterners periodically cleansed their sacred precincts and/or sacred objects contained in them. While some Anatolians purified a new temple with blood (see below),²³ other substances were generally used. The Sumerian Nanshe Hymn mentions purification of the temple belonging to the goddess Nanshe : "[] her house Sirara where water is sprinkled. . . ."²⁴ On the fourth day of the Hittite Ninth Year Festival of Telipinu, images of several deities (including the god Telipinu) and a cult pedestal were ceremonially transported on a cart from Telipinu's temple to a river, in which they were washed.²⁵

Purgation of the god Marduk's Esagila temple complex in Babylon was accomplished by sprinkling water, sounding a copper bell, and carrying around a censer and torch inside the temple. Then the Ezida guest cella of the god Nabû was purified in two stages.²⁶ The first stage included not only sprinkling holy water and carrying a censer and torch, but also smearing the doors with cedar oil and wiping (Akkadian *kuppuru*, cognate to Hebrew *kipper*, "purge") the cella with the decapitated carcass of a ram. The second purification of the Ezida involved setting up a kind of canopy called "the Golden Heaven" and reciting an incantation calling on the gods to exorcise demons from the temple.

Composed centuries before the Israelite Day of Atonement "judgment day" began (Lev 16), the Sumerian Nanshe Hymn similarly expresses the concept that human beings would be annually judged by their deity. The Hymn describes a New Year celebration at which the goddess Nanshe is portrayed as holding a yearly review of persons economically dependent on her temple. Depending on whether they were faithful in observing her ritual

²² *COS*, 2.19: 110.

²³ *COS*, 1.70: 176.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.162: 530; cf. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once...: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), 138.

²⁵ Gane, *Ritual Dynamic Structure*, 261-276.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 225-237; cf. James Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 333-334; Mark Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993), 445-446.

GANE: UNIFYING LOGIC OF ISRAELITE PURIFICATION OFFERINGS

and ethical standards throughout the year and in coming to her temple to participate at the New Year, she would renew or terminate their contracts.²⁷

Food Offered to Deities

Ancient Near Eastern peoples viewed deities as favorably disposed by the smell of incense and offerings of food, including meat.²⁸ Sacrifices involving burning of food items were practiced by those living in Syro-Palestine, whose rituals were closest to those of the Israelites. For example, an Ugaritic epic describes a sacrifice by King Kirta:

He entered the shade of (his) tent,
took a sacrificial lamb in his hand,
a kid in both hands,
all his best food.
He took a fowl, a sacrificial bird,
poured wine into a silver cup
honey into a golden bowl.
He climbed to the summit of the tower,
mounted the top of the wall.
He raised his hands heavenward,
sacrificed to the Bull, his father ʾIlu.
He brought down [Ba^ʿlu] with his sacrifice,
the Son of Dagan with his game.²⁹

²⁷ *COS*, 1.162: 528. For further analysis of this text and comparison with Leviticus, see Gane, *Cult and Character*, 355-362. For other Mesopotamian texts in which New Years are days of inspection, see *COS*, 1.173: 557-558; Wolfgang Heimpel, "The Nanshe Hymn," *JCS* 33 (1981): 110; Karel van der Toorn, "Form and Function of the New Year Festival in Babylonia and Israel," in *Congress Volume: Leuven, 1989*, ed. J. A. Emerton (VTSup 43; Leiden: Brill, 1991), 5.

²⁸ E.g., *COS*, 1.143: 474. Israel's deity does not need human food (Ps. 50:12-13), but other gods are thought to be dependent upon such sustenance. For example, in the Babylonian epic *Atraḥasīs*, the gods suffer from hunger and thirst during the great Flood because there are no humans to offer them sacrifices. So when *Atraḥasīs* (the "Noah" figure) subsequently offers his sacrifice, the gods smell the offering (compare Gen 8:20-21) and crowd around like flies (W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Ḥasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, repr. 1999; orig. 1969], 98-99). Unlike YHWH, they enjoy the smell because it promises an end to their hunger.

²⁹ *COS*, 1.102: 335.

Burned sacrifices were also performed in Anatolia, but apparently not in Egypt or Mesopotamia.³⁰ Burning food limits anthropomorphic conceptions of deities because humans do not consume food in the form of smoke.³¹

Ritual Manipulation of Blood

In the Israelite ritual system that served the celestial deity YHWH, blood was intentionally and meaningfully applied in various ways (dashing, sprinkling, daubing) to objects, areas, and persons. By contrast, Mesopotamian and Ugaritic cults lacked such ritual use of blood.³² However, Hittites and Greeks used blood for libations to netherworld deities, conveyed to them by means of ritual holes in the ground.³³

Anatolians and Greeks manipulated blood for ritual purification. Just after a blood libation through slaughter of a sheep in a ritual pit, a ritual involved in establishing a new Anatolian temple for the “Goddess of the

³⁰ For an overview of the kinds of sacrifices practiced in various parts of the ancient Near East, including Ugarit, see Martin Selman, “Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East,” in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. R. Beckwith and M. Selman (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 88–104. For examples of Ugaritic sacrificial procedures, including burnt and well-being offerings, see *COS*, 1.95: 299–301. For some parallel kinds of Punic sacrifices, see *ibid.*, 1.98: 306–307. On Greek sacrifices, see *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:653–655. In ancient Babylonia there was no custom of burning slaughtered animal victims to ashes. Incense was the only Babylonian offering material completely consumed by fire (W. G. Lambert, “Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Quaegebeur [Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta; Leuven: Peeters, 1993], 194).

³¹ According to Lambert, in Sumerian and Babylonian literature, “the human race was created solely to serve the gods by providing their food and drink. The whole matter is conceived anthropomorphically. ‘Sacrifice’ is a misnomer applied to this conceptual world” (*ibid.*, 198).

³² Tzvi Abusch, “Blood in Israel and Mesopotamia,” in *Emanuel: Studies in Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov*, ed. S. Paul et al. (VTSup; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 675–684; Gregorio del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion According to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit* (transl. W. Watson; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1999), 41.

³³ Harry Hoffner, “Second Millennium Antecedents to the Hebrew *’ôb*,” *JBL* 86 (1967): 390–392, 395–396, 399; cf. Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 459; cf. 325.

GANE: UNIFYING LOGIC OF ISRAELITE PURIFICATION OFFERINGS

Night” purified the cultic infrastructure by bloodying the golden image, the wall, and all the implements of the deity.³⁴

A Greek ritual for purification from homicide called for slaughtering a piglet over the head of the person undergoing purification and then rinsing off the blood. In another Greek purification ritual, officials carried a piglet around the city square in Athens, then slaughtered it, sprayed its blood over the seats, and discarded the carcass. These practices somewhat resembled aspects of Israelite purification offerings.³⁵ Unlike the Greek procedures, the Israelite sacrifices applied blood to part of the sanctuary/temple of the deity, especially the altar.

Significance of the Combination in the Purification Offering

There were Ancient Near Eastern rituals that addressed sins or ritual purification, offered food to deities, and attributed significance to blood. Food could be used for propitiation or restitution to restore divine-human relationships, and blood could be an agent of purification, including from moral faults (homicide; see above). Only in Israel were blood and food elements combined in one sacrifice to a celestial deity in order to remedy sin or physical ritual impurity. Other Israelite expiatory sacrifices (burnt and reparation offerings) utilized blood and food elements, but the purification offering was unique in its emphasis on blood on altar horns and its function for removing ritual impurity.³⁶

What is the meaning of the special combination of process and function in the purification offering? Unlike chthonic deities, for whom blood was the beverage of choice, YHWH did not require any libations of this liquid. Rather, purification and expiation with blood meant that the process had life and death consequences because blood represents life and God assigned it on the altar to ransom the lives of those on whose behalf it was applied (Lev 17:11). Indeed, those who failed to properly remedy impurity or control its contact with the sacred sphere could die (Lev 15:31; cf. 7:20-21; Num 19:13, 20), and one who had committed a moral fault bore his/her

³⁴ *COS*, 1.70: 176.

³⁵ See *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:1132. Homicide was not expiable by ritual within the Israelite ritual system (Num 35:31).

³⁶ It is true that burnt offerings could supplement purification offerings (see above).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

culpability (Lev 5:1) until expiation was obtained through blood sacrifice (v. 6).

Offering fat as a token “debt payment” of “food” from the same sacrificial victim that provided the blood showed that purification related to a divine person, not merely to pollution. Sin or impurity created a “debt” to the Lord, whose law should be obeyed and whose people should be pure. It was their sins and impurities that metaphorically polluted his sanctuary/temple, representing his authority and reputation as ruler and judge, so that it had to be purged on the Day of Atonement.³⁷ Human parties were indebted concerning physical ritual impurity because its source was human, not demonic.³⁸

The same kind of sacrifice—purification offering—could purge moral faults and also physical ritual impurities, which were symptomatic of “the birth-death cycle that comprises mortality.”³⁹ These evils were distinct: sins violated God’s law, but physical impurities by themselves (unless God’s law prohibited incurring them; e.g., Num 6:6-8) did not. However, there was a close relationship between sins and impurities because mortality, the state of sin, results from sinful action (Rom 5:12; 6:23).⁴⁰ Therefore, as expressed by Psalm 103:3, human beings need both “legal” forgiveness and physical healing.

According to the Bible, death is not the necessary corridor to the next phase of an immortal life, as in ancient Egypt. Rather, it is evil intruder, so impurity associated with it must be kept away from the immortal YHWH

³⁷ On the dynamics and meaning of the two stages of atonement (throughout the year and on the Day of Atonement, the latter dealing with divine judicial responsibility), see Gane, *Cult and Character*, 267-333; idem, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 277-288.

³⁸ Cf. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (transl. and abridg. M. Greenberg; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 103-105; Milgrom, *Leviticus* 1-16, 1068-1069.

³⁹ Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 49; see also 31-32, 48, 50, 207-8; cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus* 1-16, 767-768, 1002-1003; idem, “The Rationale for Biblical Impurity,” *JANES* 22 (1993): 107-111.

⁴⁰ On the relationship between sins and physical ritual impurities, see Gane, *Cult and Character*, 198-202; idem, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 225-227.

GANE: UNIFYING LOGIC OF ISRAELITE PURIFICATION OFFERINGS

(cf. Deut 5:26), whose holiness is life and who will ultimately eradicate death as an enemy (cf. Rev 20:14).⁴¹

Combination of “legal” and “healing” approaches to sin in functions of the purification offering reflect the realization that sin is “something deeper than an offense at law, a breach of a regulation. . . . The sin and the sinner were identified, and must be separated. Much more drastic and positive remedies were required than legal process could supply. It was more than the ‘anger’ of an offended deity that sin involved, or the damage done his ‘honor’ that must be offset by placating words or deeds (as in mediaeval theology).”⁴²

In Pentateuchal ritual law, the “legal” and “healing/biological” approaches to sin are inextricably interwoven together. “The ‘legal’ aspect has quasi-biological ramifications and the ‘biological’ is at the same time legal.”⁴³

As A. Büchler observed, expressing the remedy for sin in terms of contamination and cleansing keeps its legal aspects from becoming “legalistic”: When Isaiah uses language of cleansing to urge for repentance and conversion (1:16-20), it “is no legalistic notion of release from penalty, or cancellation of guilt, but something vastly deeper in human experience, and far deeper in the history of the human race, namely cleansing within, the resolution to ‘sin no more,’ the power to cease from sinning and be accepted before the God of all Righteousness and Goodness.”⁴⁴

Conclusion

Ancient Near Eastern peoples offered animals to their deities as food, performed rituals to purify persons or to remedy offenses against their gods,

⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 227-230; 263-267.

⁴² A. Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century* (ed. H. M. Orlinsky; LBS; New York: KTAV, 1967), xxvi-xxvii; cf. xxviii-xxix.

⁴³ Gane, *Cult and Character*, 160.

⁴⁴ Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement*, xxx. Cf. Gane, *Cult and Character*, 162—“By bringing together the views of sin as legal wrong and sin as pollution, the Israelite ritual system addressed not only the legal standing of YHWH’s people, but also their moral state. It showed the way not only to freedom from condemnation, but also to development of healthy character. We will find the climax of this combination in observances on the Day of Atonement, which affirmed freedom from condemnation for those of loyal character (Lev 16:29-31). In the process, the great Day affirmed the just character of Israel’s divine King.”

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

used blood for purification, and annually purged sacred precincts or objects in connection with occasions of divine judgment. Remarkably, Israelite purification offerings combined all of these features in a single kind of animal sacrifice that provided for faulty human beings a unified way to come into harmony with God.

Roy E. Gane is Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Languages at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. He finished his Ph.D. in Biblical Hebrew Language and Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1992 and taught in the Religion Department at Pacific Union College from 1992 until he joined the Seminary in 1994. He has authored numerous articles, Adult Bible Study Guides on Judges (spring, 1996) and Isaiah (spring, 2004), and seven books: *God's Faulty Heroes* (Review and Herald, 1996); *Altar Call* (Diadem, 1999); *Ritual Dynamic Structure* (Gorgias, 2004); *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan, 2004); *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Eisenbrauns, 2005); *Who's Afraid of the Judgment?* (Pacific Press, 2006); *In the Shadow of the Shekinah: God's Journey With Us* (Review and Herald, 2009); plus the "Leviticus" portion of the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (2009), and he was the primary translator of Leviticus in the *Common English Bible* (2011).
gane@andrews.edu