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FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION IN OLD TESTAMENT
SACRIFICE

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Introduction

The twenty-first century has begun with social disintegration and human estrangement. Broken relationships are experienced everywhere. There are urgent cries for the cessation of hostilities and the advent of peace. The restoration of a good relationship between hostile parties can only be rooted in true forgiveness and reconciliation. For Christians, the teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation in the Scriptures offer crucial guidance in response to this situation. The Old Testament provides rich illumination on this topic, especially in the sacrificial legislation in the book of Leviticus. Through the Old Testament sacrificial system, God promised to forgive and be reconciled with repentant worshippers, thus enabling them to draw near to the Lord again. Nevertheless, it is important to ask how the sacrificial system worked and in what conditions the forgiveness was granted and reconciliation became effectual.

In this paper, we will investigate the purification and reparation offerings in Leviticus in order to articulate the theological truth and implications of forgiveness and reconciliation. I aim at demonstrating the hallmarks of genuine forgiveness and reconciliation embedded in the Old Testament sacrificial rituals.

Expiatory Sacrifices in Leviticus

The book of Leviticus is God's revelation to his newly established people at the tent of meeting that was erected at Sinai (Lev

27:34). The purpose of this revelation is to ensure the enduring presence of Yahweh within the community and to nurture the covenant relationship established with him.¹

Leviticus begins with the gifts of sacrifice, which is the heart of public worship.² Chapters 1–7 outline the five major offerings: burnt offering, cereal offering, well-being offering, purification offering, and reparation offering. The first three are voluntary gifts characterized by the phrase “a soothing aroma to the Lord” (ריח־נִיחֻחַ לַיהוָה Lev 1:9; cf. 1:13, 17; 2:2, 9; 3:5), and function as expressions of praise and homage to God (Leviticus 1–3).³ The last two sacrifices are required because of sin, reflecting notions of atonement, forgiveness, and restitution.⁴ They function as channels of the Lord for sinners to express their penitence and to plead for divine forgiveness.

The purification offering (זָבַח־טָהוּר; Lev 4:1–5:13)⁵ and reparation offering (זָבַח־עֹשֶׂה־חַטָּאת; Lev 5:14–6:7 [MT: 5:14–26])⁶ are expiatory gifts that deal with sin that disrupts the relationship with God and his created world.⁷ These remedial offerings attend to unintentional sins only. By contrast, Num 15:30–31 states that intentional sins cannot be expiated.⁸ Both offerings, presided

1. Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 55.

2. Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 57.

3. Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 66.

4. Budd, *Leviticus*, 77. These offerings and concepts will be discussed in detail below.

5. Nearly all versions and translations render זָבַח־טָהוּר as “sin offering.” However, Milgrom argues successfully that this term would be better understood as referring to the process of purification, especially since זָבַח־טָהוּר sometimes is used in situations that have no relation to sin, such as Leviticus 12, where the blood acts as the purging agent. In this paper, זָבַח־טָהוּר is translated as “purification offering” in accordance with Milgrom’s suggestion (Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology*, 67–69).

6. Most of the versions render זָבַח־עֹשֶׂה־חַטָּאת as “guilt offering.” According to the nature of the sacrifice, Milgrom suggests that this term should be translated as “reparation offering,” which is adopted in this paper (Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience*, 3–12).

7. Expiatory gift refers to the compensation for the wrongdoing.

8. Milgrom argues that confession, which only appears in four priestly passages (Lev 5:5; 16:21; 26:40; Num 5:6–7), “is the legal device fashioned by the priestly legislators to convert deliberate sins into inadvertences, thereby

over by the priest, are presented publicly in the tent of meeting before the Lord (לפני יהוה), the one who receives the sacrificial gifts (Lev 4:4; cf. 4:15, 24, 31; 5:6, 7, 12, 19; 6:7 [MT: 5:26]). This setting implies that sins, even when committed by an individual, are not private affairs. The remedy for sin must be made before the Lord, as all sins are sins against God (the offended), thus threatening his holy presence and endangering the solidarity of the whole community (cf. Ps 51:4 [MT: 51:6]).⁹

The reparation offering, which operates similarly to the purification offering, not only provides expiation for sin (especially an unfaithful act (תמעל מעל); Lev 5:15; cf. 6:2 [MT: 5:21]), but also serves as a means of reparation. The use of the verb השיב (restore) in parallel with שלם (restitution) suggests a legal context in which the offender has to compensate for the loss in full and add one-fifth more as a penalty (Lev 5:6; 6:4–5 [MT: 5:23–24]). The guilty parties have to give the total sum to those who have suffered the damages before they can present their reparation offerings to the Lord (Lev 6:5–6 [MT: 5:24–25]). This is the only sacrifice that can be converted into money (Lev 5:15, 18; 6:6 [MT: 5:25]), thus facilitating payment.¹⁰ This unique step demonstrates that forgiveness from God cannot be secured until rectification has been made with the one who has been harmed.

Ritual achieves its goal through a process of activities,¹¹ which, according to Gilders, is a mode of communication that is

qualifying them for sacrificial expiation.” See the case of intentional sin in Lev 5:1 (Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 301–2). Boda disagrees with Milgrom’s proposal and suggests that sins should be divided into three types categorized according to intent: “inadvertent errors that can be forgiven/purified, deliberate errors that can be forgiven, and defiant sin that cannot be forgiven” (Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 60; cf. Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, 59–60).

9. Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 60; Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, 107.

10. The reparation offering in the priestly system is the most difficult to understand and its distinction from a purification offering, as Milgrom states, “has been the despair of scholars through the ages” (Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience*, 1, 14). See Anderson, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings,” 880.

11. Gane states that a ritual is an activity system with meaning attached to its physical activities. The goal for such a system is to accomplish a particular “transformation” through an activity process. He stipulates that it is not the activities that define the system but the “goal” of the ritual that determines

accomplished through symbols attached to the activities.¹² Thus, examining the sacrificial process is important for an understanding of the goal of the expiatory offering. The ritual procedure varies for four classes of offenders: the anointed priest, the whole congregation, a ruler, and a common person.¹³ The variation is primarily based on the impact of the sin on the community as a whole.¹⁴ Except when fine flour is the offering, the atonement process generally involves the following five steps:

By the offender:

(1) Compensate the loss of the injured party (for reparation offerings only).

(2) Bring an unblemished animal to the tent of meeting.

(3) Lay a hand on the animal so as to identify oneself with the animal, which one then slays.

By the priest:

(4) Perform the blood ritual and handle the animal remains to signify the removal of impurity.

By the Lord:

(5) A forgiveness formula is proclaimed: “so the priest shall make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven” (וכפר) :עלהם הכהן ונסלח להם; Lev 4:20; cf. 4:26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 18; 6:7 [MT: 5:26]) to imply the granting of forgiveness.¹⁵

which activities are necessary to achieve the desired change. Therefore, the goal of the expiatory offering defines the activities that should be included and the way they should be performed. Understanding this will aid in the interpretation of the ritual in Leviticus. See Gane, *Cult Character*, 3–24.

12. Gilders, *Blood Ritual*, 3. Douglas also urges against imposing the Deuteronomic version on the Levitical one, as Leviticus’s literary style works through analogies (Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 13, 18).

13. This procedure, although referring to the purification offering, should be shared by both purification and reparatory offerings.

14. The economic means of the individual offerer were also considered (Lev 4:27–35).

15. This formula is only absent in the purification offering of the anointed priest. The reason is not stated explicitly and scholars have differing opinions. Kiuchi suggests that the anointed priest is not forgiven as the ritual is not sufficient to atone for him (Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, 95). Perhaps this is why the anointed priest needs to make atonement for himself and his household before carrying out any other rituals during the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:11).

The structure of the process above reveals that expiatory sacrifice is a somber offering, with forgiveness as its objective. This complicated procedure is a reminder that the offender needs to take remedial measures before forgiveness is granted. First, the offender still suffers loss as the sacrifice is costly. Second, the laying on of the hand and the slaying of the animal in the worship center implies that the offerer must admit and confess their sin publicly.¹⁶ Third, the extra step in the reparation offering reveals that the offender, besides rectifying the relationship with God, must also compensate the damage caused to other parties. Finally, with the assistance of the priest who performs the blood ritual, forgiveness from God will be granted. As a result, the offerer can be reconciled to both God and the world.¹⁷ If the purification offering focuses on vertical forgiveness, the reparation offering pulls in the dimension of horizontal forgiveness. Both dimensions are important in the expiatory sacrifice.

Sin and Consequence

The purpose of expiatory sacrifice is remedial, that is, to address the negative consequence of sin.¹⁸ The priestly literature stresses that sin will incur punitive judgment from the Divine, who is the offended party whenever a human sins.¹⁹ This punishment is

However, Milgrom argues that the formula that appears in Lev 4:20 should also cover the anointed priest, as the purification offerings of the anointed priest and the whole congregation should be viewed as a single case running from Lev 4:1 to Lev 4:21 (Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 241).

16. Although the word “confess” (וָדָבַר) only appears in 5:5 within Lev 4:1–6:7. However, confession can be implied through the actions performed by the offender during the sacrificial process in the public worship center.

17. Balentine, *Leviticus*, 50; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 370.

18. For detailed discussion about sin and consequence, see Sklar’s work (Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 11–43).

19. See the discussion above regarding God as the offended party in the context of human sin. The negative consequence that follows sin might be due to divine retribution (either executed directly by the Lord or by the covenant community on his behalf) or natural consequences not resulting from an external judgment of the Lord who may be involved in the process but not in a

either executed by the Lord himself (e.g., Lev 10:1–2) or by the faith community (e.g., Lev 20:2–5), who should respond eagerly as sin threatens God’s presence within the community and endangers the community’s survival.

The connection between sin and punishment is so strong that, in the Old Testament, the terms “sin” (חַטָּא) or “guilt” (עֲשׂוֹן) can refer, according to context, to the wrong itself or to the penalties of the wrong (e.g., Zech 14:18–19). The consequences of sin include (1) “death” (מוֹת), which is the most frequently prescribed penalty for sin (e.g., Lev 10:1–2); (2) “cutting off” (כַּרְתָּ), which may mean excommunication from the covenant community (e.g., Exod 30:33) or premature death (e.g., Exod 31:14); (3) “bearing sin” (נִשָּׂא עֲוֹן), which is a general statement emphasizing that sinners will suffer the punitive consequences of sin (e.g., Lev 20:20); and (4) “becoming guilty” (עֲשָׂה עֲשׂוֹן), which may indicate the recognition of one’s guilt.²⁰

The first three penalties for sin (death, cutting off, bearing sin) frequently occur in the context of intentional sin, which cannot be forgiven. The last one (becoming guilty) appears in the context of sin that may be atoned for.²¹ In the latter case, expiatory sacrifice must be properly offered, otherwise, punitive consequences of sin will continue to lead the sinner to death as stated in Lev 17:11. This verse indicates that the blood of the atoning sacrifice serves to ransom the offender’s life, which otherwise is at risk because of sin. In the priestly literature, there is a strong connection between sin and death. Sin, whether it is intentional or inadvertent, leads to death if not addressed properly.

judicial sense. For the debate on this issue, see Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 12.

20. Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 60; Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, 68–70. Sklar’s rendering is “to suffer guilt’s consequences.” See also Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 24–41.

21. The verb עֲשָׂה עֲשׂוֹן appears 11 times in Leviticus 4, with 5 out of 13 occurrences in the priestly literature: Lev 4:13, 22, 27; 5:2, 3, 4, 5, 17, 19 (2 times) and 23 (MT); Num 5:6, 7. Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 24.

Atonement and Forgiveness

As noted above, sinners who have committed unintentional sins may only escape death by means of sacrificial atonement, which is an essential element of the purification and reparation sacrifices. At the end of each expiatory offering, a forgiveness formula is announced to signify the objective of the sacrifice: “so the priest shall make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven” (וּכְפַר עֲלֵהֶם הַכֹּהֵן וְנִסְלַח לָהֶם; Lev 4:20; cf. 4:26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 18; 6:7 [MT: 5:26]). This concluding statement includes two important verbs: כָּפַר (to make atonement) and נִסְלַח (to be forgiven), with כָּפַר as the prerequisite to נִסְלַח. Having established the role of the offerer in the sacrificial process, I turn to the roles played by the priest (כָּפַר) and by God (נִסְלַח).

The Meaning of כָּפַר in Old Testament Sacrifice

The meaning of כָּפַר (to make atonement) has been understood variously. Traditionally, scholars have appealed to Arabic *kafara* to supply כָּפַר (*kipper*) with a sense of “to cover.” Thus, the priest covers the sinner so that the sinner does not have to face the wrath of God.²² However, this approach, which focuses upon the “original” meaning of the word in order to determine the word’s meaning in a later context, has received criticism.²³

Recently, there has been general consensus among biblical scholars that sees a close connection between כָּפַר (to atone) and כֹּפֶר (ransom) when used in the context of sin. Often, כָּפַר (*kipper*) is understood in terms of כֹּפֶר (*koper*). While כֹּפֶר (*koper*) means “ransom,” then כָּפַר (*kipper*) should be interpreted as “to pay ransom.”²⁴ In addition, Milgrom affirms the relatedness of כָּפַר (*kipper*) and כֹּפֶר (*koper*): “There exists a strong possibility that all texts that assign to *kipper* [כָּפַר] the

22. Brown, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 497.

23. Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 44–45.

24. *Ibid.*, 46.

function of averting God's wrath have *koper* [כִּפֹּר] in mind."²⁵ Thus, to identify the usage of כִּפֹּר (ransom) in the context of sin can shed light on the function of כִּפֹּר (to atone) in the expiatory sacrifice.

Through careful exegesis of passages that contain כִּפֹּר (ransom), those elements central to the sense of this term can be identified. The well-known case of the goring ox (Exod 21:28–32) is one of the כִּפֹּר passages, which indicates clearly that: (1) the wrong of the guilty party has broken the relationship with the injured; (2) the life of the ox owner is forfeited in order to compensate for the loss of the suffering party; (3) however, whether a כִּפֹּר (ransom) is accepted instead of death is up to the injured to decide; (4) if כִּפֹּר (ransom) is granted as the mitigated penalty, then the כִּפֹּר (ransom) functions not only to rescue the life of the guilty, but also to appease the injured; and (5) as a result, the damaged relationship is restored in peace. The exegesis of other related כִּפֹּר passages (Exod 30:11–16; Num 35:30–34; Ps 49:8–9; Prov 6:20–35; 1 Sam 12:1–5; Amos 5:12; Isa 43:3–4; and Job 33:24) also reveals the above fundamental elements of כִּפֹּר (ransom).²⁶

In sum, these elements delineate כִּפֹּר (ransom) as a legitimate payment, which is a mitigated penalty accepted by the offended party that delivers the guilty party from the original punishment that the sin warranted, i.e. death. Therefore, כִּפֹּר (ransom) is a price for life (Job 33:24; Exod 30:12). This lesser payment serves to rescue the life of the guilty and to appease the offended party, aiming at restoring peace to the disturbed relationship.

The word כִּפֹּר (to atone) not only means to pay the ransom, but also to purge the impurity. In the priestly literature, כִּפֹּר (to atone) often occurs in conjunction with and relates closely to three states: the impure (טמא), the pure (טהור), and the holy (קדש). This connection suggests that כִּפֹּר (to atone) also plays an important role in the context of purification and consecration.

25. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1082.

26. For detailed analysis of each passage, see Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 52–59.

The contamination of sin affects the offender and also the sacred space. Therefore, the blood ritual is required, according to Sklar's study, to cleanse/consecrate in order to make the offender pure (טהור) and holy (קדוש) again.²⁷ Hence, they have been restored to a state suitable for a relationship with the holy God.²⁸ This function of the כִּפּוּר rite, suggested by Sklar, differs significantly from the influential theory of Milgrom, who insists that the blood-ritual only purifies the sanctuary, but not the offerer, who has been purified at the point of repentance.²⁹ Nevertheless, Gane shares Sklar's view and argues that the privative מן (from) of מַחֲטָאֵתוֹ (from his sin) in the forgiveness formula (Lev 4:26) indicates that purification offerings can remove evils from their offerers.³⁰

27. The following example relates to the pure (טהור) state: "But if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, the one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement (וכפר) for her, and she will be clean (וטהרה)" (Lev 12:8). The following example relates to the holy (קדוש) state: "Thus they shall eat those things [referring to the ram of ordination that was offered on Aaron and his sons' behalf] by which atonement (כפר) was made at their ordination and consecration (לקדש אתם; literally: to consecrate them); but a layman shall not eat them, because they are holy" (Exod 29:33). See Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 105–36.

28. Based on Exod 24:3–8, Gilders has an alternative view on the blood ritual: "The sprinkling of blood toward or in the abode of Yahweh's presence is a relational-indexing act, indicating a relationship between the head priest and Yahweh, as well as between Yahweh and the community, which the priest represents inside the shrine. His blood manipulation activity indexes the priest as a mediator between the people and Yahweh" (Gilders, *Blood Ritual*, 140–41). Gilders's suggestion is in line with the finding in this paper that the ritual aims at the restoration of relationship between the Lord and the offerer.

29. Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology*, 75–81; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 254–58.

30. He argues that the privative מן (from) of מַחֲטָאֵתוֹ (literally: from his sin) in the forgiveness formula: "The priest shall make atonement (וכפר) for him in regard to his sin (מַחֲטָאֵתוֹ), and he will be forgiven (ונסלח)" indicates that the expiatory offering can purify the offerer (Lev 4:26; cf. 5:10) (Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 104–5). Also, see his detailed analysis in Gane, *Cult Character*, 106–43; 198–202. Boda agrees that priestly rituals facilitate movement from impure to pure or from pure to holy, while sin and impurity cause movement from holy to pure or from pure to impure. He says that "there

This purification process is exhibited symbolically in the expiatory offering. In Lev 4:5–7, the anointed priest sprinkles the blood seven times before the curtain that separates the outer sanctuary from the inner sanctuary, places some of the blood on the horns of the incense altar, and pours out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar of burnt offering, thus ritually purifying the entire tent of meeting and the outer courtyard, which have been defiled because of sin. The blood ritual is critical and varies according to the status of the offerer (cf. 4:16–18, 25, 30, and 34). The inadvertent sins of the anointed priest are so serious that their negative consequences not only affect the anointed priest himself, but also the whole community that he serves, thus disrupting their relationship with God. These sins also defile ritually the entire sanctuary, right up to the curtain that marks symbolically the entrance to the Holy of Holies, thus threatening the intimate presence of God on earth. The dispersal of the blood provides a ritual way of cleansing both people and sanctuary of the sins and thus making them hospitable again for God.³¹

In summary, in the sacrificial system, כִּפֹּר (to atone) has a strong relationship with כֶּפֶר (ransom) so that כִּפֹּר (to atone) is understood as the effecting of a כֶּפֶר payment on behalf of the guilty. The offended (God) agrees to accept a substitute (a כִּפֹּר), which is the life of the sacrifice. Although the mitigated punishment is still costly to the offender, it is much less so when compared with the deserved penalty, as the consequence of sin is usually death.

is a fuzzy line between physical ritual impurity and moral sin” (Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 58).

The concept of purification is foregrounded vividly on the Day of Atonement when the non-sacrificial goat carries away the impurity of the community from the sanctuary. According to Boda: “The function, then, of the Day of Atonement rituals was to purify the sanctuary and its sancta of impurities and sins (Lev 16:16, 18, 19, 33) and as a result purify the people (Lev 16:30). Defiant sins could not be remedied for the individual by the sacrificial system, but because these sins defile the sanctuary and the community as a whole, a remedy for this impurity was provided once a year on the Day of Atonement” (Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 74).

31. Balentine, *Leviticus*, 42–43.

Sins pollute the land and major impurities endanger life, therefore, the כִּפֹּר rite needs to address purgation as well. Because the sacred space and the offender are purified, they can resume the state of being pure (טָהוּר) and holy (קֹדֶשׁ) that is required for God's presence.

In this manner, כִּפֹּר (to atone) should mean כִּפֹּר purgation, which mainly addresses the consequence of sin. The ransoming power of blood enables כִּפֹּר (to atone) to rescue the offerers from the consequence of sin and the purifying power of blood enables כִּפֹּר (to atone) to cleanse their impurity. Finally, the כִּפֹּר rite (atonement) results in סָלַח (forgiveness). Hence, sinners can reconcile with God and restore their relationship.

The Meaning of נָסַח in Old Testament Sacrifice

Following the completion of the expiatory sacrifice, וְנָסַח (then he shall be forgiven) appears together with כִּפֹּר (to make atonement) in some variation as a forgiveness formula: “so the priest shall make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven” (וּכְפַר עֲלֵהֶם הַכֹּהֵן וְנָסַח לָהֶם; Lev 4:20). The Niphal וְנָסַח in priestly literature is a prompt to search for the subject who grants the forgiveness. It is commonly agreed that forgiveness comes from the Lord, the one who is also the subject of סָלַח (to forgive) elsewhere in the Old Testament. In the entire Hebrew Bible, only God acts to סָלַח (forgive), never humans. The use of the passive form here may indicate that, although the priest carries out the כִּפֹּר rites, only God can determine their efficacy by forgiving sin.³² The Lord himself has provided the sacrificial system as a means for sinners to obtain forgiveness.

The Niphal perfect וְנָסַח (then he shall be forgiven) occurs 13 times in the Old Testament in a context where a sin has been committed and a sacrifice is made.³³ Levine, drawing on Ugaritic and Akkadian cognates, proposes that סָלַח should mean “to wash, sprinkle with water”; thus, the basic sense would be

32. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 245.

33. See Lev 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7 [MT: 5:26]; 19:22; Num 15:25, 26, 28. Except 6:7 [MT: 5:26] and 19:22, all the sins listed are unintentional.

that of cleansing away with water.³⁴ His understanding of סלח is quite similar to the human concept of pardon, which includes not only the sense of ceasing from anger, but also the sense of not punishing.³⁵ However, Milgrom states that the concept of סלח in the Hebrew Bible is far more complex and is different from any anthropopathic notions of forgiveness that humans are capable of giving. Milgrom states that the rendering “to forgive” for סלח is not exactly accurate.³⁶

When God grants pardon (סלחה) in Num 14:20 in response to Moses’ petition for forgiveness (סלחנא) in Num 14:19, the סלח granted cannot connote forgiveness in the human sense since punishment is immediately announced (Num 14:21–24; cf. 14:32–33). When Moses invokes God’s attribute in Num 14:18 as a foundation of his petition in v. 19, he clearly does not refer to forgiveness in the human sense: “The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear *the guilty*” (לֹא יִנְקָה; or better, “but he surely will not leave unpunished”)³⁷ Moses understands that sinners must bear the punitive consequences of sins, though punishments can be substituted by mitigated penalties through the כִּפּוּר arrangement if the offended (God) agrees.³⁸ What he pleads is that God be reconciled with his people. This connotation of סלח is further supported in the golden calf narrative when God responds to Moses’ request for סלח by renewing the covenant (Exod 34:9–10). Therefore, the offender is longing for and dependent upon God’s divine forgiveness (סלח) in order to restore the broken relationship. Reconciliation is the ultimate goal of the expiatory sacrifice.

The consonance between סלח (to forgive) and נשא עון (to bear sin) finds support when these two terms are used

34. Levine, *Leviticus*, 24.

35. As in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*.

36. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 245.

37. Brown, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 667; Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 720.

38. The punishment of the repentant sinner might be due either to divine retribution, or due to natural consequences. See note 20.

interchangeably in some instances. In Exod 32:32, when Moses asks the Lord to forgive the sin of the people (הַשָּׂא חַטָּאתָם) after the golden calf incident, the phrase נָשָׂא חַטָּאת (to bear sin) is used with the meaning “to forgive sin.”³⁹ In Exod 34:7, when God is described as the one “who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin” (נֹשֵׂא עֲוֹן וּפְשָׁע וַחַטָּאתָה) in his self-revelation, the phrase נָשָׂא עֲוֹן פְּשָׁע חַטָּאת (to bear iniquity, transgression, and sin) employed has the connotation of forgiveness of sin. Thus, by examining the meaning of נָשָׂא עֲוֹן (to bear sin), we can have a better understanding of סָלַח (to forgive).

The phrase נָשָׂא עֲוֹן occurs in three distinct contexts: (1) the sinner is the subject of the verb, thus נָשָׂא עֲוֹן means “to bear punishment”; (2) the offended is the subject of the verb, thus the offended agrees to bear the sin consequence, hence, נָשָׂא עֲוֹן may be translated as “to forgive sin”; (3) a third party is the subject of the verb, thus נָשָׂא עֲוֹן can render as “to bear away punishment.”

In this study, it is the second usage of נָשָׂא עֲוֹן, where the offended is the subject, that can shed light on the nature of divine forgiveness (סָלַח). In the context of sacrifice, the offended is the Lord, who bears our sin consequences (נָשָׂא עֲוֹן) when he grants סָלַח after the כִּפּוּר rite.⁴⁰ Although we do not know exactly how God bears our punishment, the consonance between סָלַח and נָשָׂא עֲוֹן demonstrates that God is deeply affected by bearing the cost of forgiveness.

There is one thing common to all verses with נָשָׂא עֲוֹן (to bear sin) used in the second sense, some form of punishment will follow the divine forgiveness announced in the immediate context. The coexistence of punishment and forgiveness is fully demonstrated in Numbers 14. In Num 14:20, the Lord said to Moses, “I have pardoned (סָלַחְתִּי) according to your word,” which does not mean Israel will escape all the punishment they

39. פֶּשַׁע, חַטָּאת, עֲוֹן may be conjoined with various terms for sin: עֲוֹן, חַטָּאת, וּפְשָׁע. These terms used in the contexts of sin that I am referring to do not have much difference in meaning, and thus for the sake of simplicity, they are treated as the same in my discussion.

40. Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 88–90.

deserve. As in Num 14:21–23, the Lord proceeds to declare that those rebellious adults will die in the wilderness.⁴¹ Thus סלח does not necessarily refer to the complete remission of punishment, but allows for a lesser penalty. In the case of Numbers 14, the original penalty is the wiping out of the entire nation immediately as mentioned in 14:11–12, while the mitigated penalty only affects the adults during their forty years wandering in the wilderness (14:29).

In light of this, it is evident that whenever sinners request that the offended נשא עון (forgive sin), they are pleading for a remission of the original penalty that the sin deserves. This substitution of a mitigated penalty in lieu of the deserved one is congruent with the כפר principle mentioned above.

In summary, the כפר rite results in divine forgiveness (סלח). The Niphal סלח suggests that only God can bring about the efficacy of the ritual by granting forgiveness. The connotation of סלח is different from any anthropopathic notions of pardon. It aims at reconciliation. The sinner performs an expiatory sacrifice in order to restore the disturbed relationship with God.

In the context of the sacrificial system, the second usage of נשא עון (to forgive sin) indicates that the Lord, as the offended when people sin, bears away the punitive consequence that the sin deserves by granting divine forgiveness (סלח) to the offender through the כפר arrangement, with the result that the sinner does not suffer the original penalty, which would probably lead to death. As a result, the כפר rite functions to reconcile the two parties, thus restoring peace to the relationship.

Implications

The Seriousness of the Consequences of Sin

It is regrettable that we moderns distance ourselves from, or even have disdain for, the priestly tradition. Our estimate and awareness of sin is so low that we are easily enslaved. The priestly understanding of sin is more than an abstraction; it is real and multifaceted. Sin operates at every level of society and

41. Ibid., 84–85; Sakenfeld, “Problem of Divine Forgiveness.”

no person is exempt from its reach. Sin is serious and has consequences. At the personal and communal level, sin disrupts relationships within community. We now live in alienation from the world around us, without harmony.⁴² Sin is like a pollutant discharged into the atmosphere and its destructive force can destroy societies and institutions.

The sins of the faith community can be even more serious, for they corrupt and defile sacred space—the body of Christ—thus threatening enjoyment of the presence of God and the solidarity of the community as a whole. As a result, the church becomes a lamp under a basket, which cannot shine before men (Matt 5:15), and hence, its prophetic voice continues to recede from the world. Today, the priestly literature continually warns us, who are God’s covenant people, that sin not only leads to death and disrupts relationship with God, but also diminishes our capacity to be the blessing we were created to be.⁴³

The Hope of Divine Forgiveness

The priestly tradition does not leave us in despair over sin, but gives us hope in God. The forgiveness formula: “so the priest shall make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven” (Lev 4:20) is repeated consistently in order to emphasize that the objective of the expiatory offering is divine forgiveness (סלח). God takes the initiative to be reconciled with his people. The Old Testament sacrifice invites sinners to repent and return to the loving God who is the *only* source of life and blessing. Genuine forgiveness and reconciliation can be found in God *alone*.

The passive form of סלח (to forgive) reminds the faith community that the agent of forgiveness is always God. Only God can grant forgiveness.⁴⁴ This concept of forgiveness belongs to the Lord is fully embraced in the New Testament. When Jesus said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5), the teachers of the law immediately accused him as a blasphemer and posed the question: “Who can forgive sins *but God alone*?”

42. Grenz, *Theology*, 268–69.

43. Balentine, *Leviticus*, 52–53.

44. *Ibid.*, 54.

(Mark 2:7, italics mine). They were correct in that, according to their scriptural tradition, forgiveness is granted by God alone.⁴⁵ This forgiveness demands our own reconciliation with those who have offended us. God retains the right to forgiveness for two main reasons. First, the act of forgiving is sometimes difficult to be practiced by finite humans alone. Without forgiveness, reconciliation is impossible. Second, the forgiveness granted by God is different from any human notion of forgiveness. For human beings, forgiveness might not always lead to reconciliation, as contended by Childs: “Forgiveness is not the equivalent of reconciliation, however, it is the means to which barriers to reconciliation (which may or may not follow) are removed.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the divine forgiveness dispensed by God aims at restoring broken relationships. Divine forgiveness allows us to move beyond forgiveness into genuine reconciliation, which is the ultimate goal of expiatory sacrifice. Reconciliation is possible as divine forgiveness flows together with grace, where mercy can triumph over justice. The forgiving mercy of God can provide a healing power to the parties involved, though the actual healing process may be different from case to case.⁴⁷ That is why Leviticus reiterates the call to turn to God, the source of divine forgiveness, in rectifying the consequences of sin and restoring the broken relationship.

It is clear that God is not content with a mere vertical view of forgiveness. Instead, as with his other gifts, he wants his new creation to share his forgiveness with those around us: “forgiving each other . . . just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you” (Col 3:13; cf. Eph 4:32). How can we forgive if forgiveness belongs to the Lord? The answer is “just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.” When we forgive according to the Scriptures, we are extending God’s forgiveness, received by us, to other people by reconciling with them (cf. 1 Cor 4:6). This is exhibited in 1 John 4:7–11: “Beloved, let us love one another,

45. See Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 64–65.

46. Childs, “Forgiveness,” 438, cited in DeVries, “From Vertical to Horizontal,” 17.

47. See DeVries, “From Vertical to Horizontal,” 17–18.

for love is from God . . . The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . Beloved, *if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*" (italics mine). In the same manner, if we have experienced God's forgiving gift, we should share God's grace with others. The faith community should be the channel of God's love, grace, and forgiveness.

To extend God's forgiveness is not a suggestion but a demand. For the faith community, horizontal forgiveness does not only originate from the vertical dimension of forgiveness, but is also a prerequisite for the vertical. This concept was clearly exhibited in the reparation offering, which required sinners to rectify their relationship with others before they could secure forgiveness from the Lord (Lev 6:5–6 [MT: 5:24–25]). The same principle is also found in Matt 5:23–24: "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." Jesus further explains the significance of this theme: "And forgive us our debts, *as we also have forgiven our debtors* . . . But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matt 6:12–15, italics mine). The parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:23–35) provides a warning that if we do not forgive others, we will face God's judgment: "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matt 18:35).

From the above discussion, we find that forgiveness and community depend on each other. The church came into existence through the divine forgiveness flowing out from the cross. However, within the church, divine forgiveness continues to be dispensed when we embrace each other.⁴⁸ The rejection of our brothers and sisters removes the foundation of God's forgiveness. The Scriptures proclaim that the Lord is a forgiving God (Exod 34:7; Num 14:18). He wants his people to imitate him by having a forgiving attitude. He loves to see the faith community

48. See Clayton, "Forgiveness," 11–12.

relating with each other in peace and harmony just like the Triune God.⁴⁹

Since forgiveness is God's gift extended through his people, shall we "continue in sin so that grace may increase?" (Rom 6:1). Just as Paul responded to this question, "May it never be!" (Rom 6:2), Leviticus removes the illusion of cheap forgiveness. The כִּפּוּר rite is a gift provided by God only to the repenting offender who suffers from the consequence of sin and longs for reconciliation with God and his created world. The complicated procedure of the expiatory offering was a continual reminder that forgiveness is not to be taken for granted. During the process, all parties were addressed: (1) the offender (the offerer) needed to confess and pay the penalty, (2) the offended (God) accepted the כִּפּוּר arrangement and agreed to forgive, (3) other injured parties were compensated in full according to the legislation, and (4) the mediator (the priest) represented the community in order to carry out the reconciliation procedure; thus, sin would not endanger the community's survival.

The consonance between סָלַח (to forgive) and נָשָׂא עוֹן (to bear sin) suggests that God is deeply affected by bearing the cost of forgiveness. Divine forgiveness is a deliberate choice and is costly, which was fully exhibited when God absorbed the pre-requisite cost in the sacrifice of his Son.⁵⁰ The Old Testament sacrifice highlights mercy and justice as crucial components of God's love. Mercy can only be an effective form of discipline if the one being disciplined understands the demand of justice and the cost of the gift of mercy.

*Do This in Remembrance of Him*⁵¹

Does the revelation at Sinai still have relevance to the church today? It is true that Old Testament sacrifice, the heart of ancient Israelite worship, could always be reduced to routine ceremony,

49. See Grenz, *Theology*, 110–27, for comments regarding the relational God.

50. Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 110.

51. The idea of this section is primarily drawn from Grenz, *Theology*, 697–704.

just as is possible with a variety of significant symbolic acts in Christian worship today. The theological significance of the expiatory offering is so important that Jesus commands his followers to repeatedly reaffirm it. Through participation in the Lord's Supper, the expiatory gift continues to speak to the faith community today.

The Lord's Supper was instituted by Jesus as a perpetual celebration at his last meal with the disciples. When Christians observe the Lord's Supper together, we reenact the Last Supper and fulfill our Lord's command: "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24; cf. 11:25). This memorial aspect draws attention to what God has done for us through his Son's sacrificial death. Through our eating and drinking, we proclaim, in a symbolic manner, that Jesus sacrificed his life for us (1 Cor 11:24–25). This past orientation brings us back to the essence of the expiatory sacrifice that provides the meaning for Jesus' death—he becomes the atonement for human sin and his blood seals a new covenant. The forgiveness formula reminds us that atonement leads to divine forgiveness, which aims at restoration of broken relationships (renewal of covenant). Christ's atoning sacrifice enables God's divine forgiveness to flow in grace to those who long for reconciliation with the loving God and his world.

The sacrificial death of Jesus not only effects a new relationship between us and God but also destroys the barriers dividing human beings (Eph 2:11–22). The vertical and horizontal dimensions of forgiveness in Old Testament sacrifice are fully embraced in Christ's atonement. The church is the eschatological covenant community, called to reflect the nature of the Triune God himself. Whenever we observe the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit rekindles our devotion for Christ and strengthens us to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). When we celebrate God's forgiving grace, we are reminded to extend his grace to other people. The expiatory gift speaks whenever we recount Jesus' death on the cross. It continues to speak when the faith community participates in Christ's reconciling work.

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