

The book of Leviticus and the doctrine of the atonement

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As they describe the laws of sacrifice, the first sixteen chapters of Leviticus repeat variations of two key phrases. The first refrain connects atonement with forgiveness: 'And the priest shall make atonement for him and he shall be forgiven.' The second connects atonement with cleansing: 'And the priest shall make atonement for him and he shall be clean.'

Consensus on a definition of 'atonement' has proved difficult. Peterson concludes: 'debate continues about the foundational meaning of the terminology of atonement'.¹ Several definitions have been suggested which all seem to attend to a single set of concerns: forgive, pardon, cover, conceal, clean, purge, wipe clean, ransom are all metaphors which connote a removal, payment or covering of sin. It would oversimplify Leviticus' treatment of atonement, however, to argue that the word means forgiveness and cleansing. As we encounter it in those two refrains, atonement is a fundamental and necessary *precursor* to the bestowal of forgiveness and cleanness. As Wenham argues, the laws on sacrifice for sin and uncleanness, with the addition of the common refrain 'and he shall be forgiven or cleansed,' point to the inadequacy of the ritual alone to achieve forgiveness and cleanness.² The laws have to be carried out in accordance with God's instructions, but the refrain indicates that the desired effects of forgiveness and cleanness are graciously granted by God. It is not a way of manipulating God. The enactment of the ritual that makes atonement does not detract from, or add to, the gracious act of God's forgiveness. Whatever atonement means, it is *not the same as* forgiveness. It has to happen *before* forgiveness is granted and the status of being clean is graciously bestowed.

Although identifying a single underlying mechanism or component of the sacrificial system which specifically achieves atonement has proved elusive, Leviticus provides the reader with a framework within which atonement makes sense. The cast of players, background relationships and practices which make up the whole sacrificial system are described in detail and the primary objective of atonement is clearly set out both by the book's position in the Pentateuch and the unfolding story of redemption and by the book's own structure and content.

In terms of its canonical position, Leviticus presents atonement within the unfolding story of redemption. Israel has been possessed by God who has made his dwelling among them as part of the Sinai covenant. Atonement, as Leviticus presents it, must therefore be seen in the context of God's presence with his saved people Israel. As such it must be understood as a fundamental ingredient in the outworking of Israel's calling and defining role as 'a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:4-6). Leviticus explicitly spells out the details of that role in terms of the theme of God dwelling with his people.

In the pages of Leviticus, atonement and the sacrificial system are presented as functioning against the background of what Derek Tidball

¹ David Peterson, 'The Atonement in Scripture' (www.oakhill.ac.uk/resources/lectures/peterson/atonement_1.html, 2000).

² Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 15-37.

calls a 'spectrum' of holiness that operated at all levels of society by virtue of the nature of God and his presence among the people.³ The spectrum defined holy, common and unclean living, and so located people, objects, foods, states of health and so on in terms of their fitness for being in the presence of the holy God. Forgiveness, cleanness, sacrifice and atonement find their meaning within this spectrum which in turn finds its meaning in the wider context of God's mission to live among his people.

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Atonement needs to be seen then as part of the larger problem of sinful people in the presence of a holy God – the constant and organising theme of Leviticus. Atonement is therefore part of a system that enables movement from one category to another in one direction along the holiness spectrum toward holiness and which counteracts the movement in the other direction toward sin, uncleanness and the defilement of God's tabernacle.

God's presence with Israel

From early on in the book of Exodus, when Moses first encounters God in the burning bush, the danger of man approaching the holy God is highlighted. God called to Moses from the bush and, as Moses approached, God said: 'do not come near; take your sandals off your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground' (Exodus 3:5).

The theme is brought to a head in Exodus 19. After God calls his people to be a holy nation, he commands Moses to set boundaries around Mount Sinai in preparation for God appearing on the mountain.

And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain. (Exodus 19:12-13)

In order for them to be part of this event, Moses needed to consecrate the priests and the people (v. 14) and warn them not to break through the limits 'lest the Lord break out against them; (v. 23, see also vv.21, 24). The Sinai Covenant is made against the background of the danger of humanity coming into contact with a holy God. The theme of a people picked out to be God's possession is no trivial matter. Approaching God and being in his presence are clearly presented as problematic issues.

The last third of the book of Exodus describes the plans and construction of the tabernacle which was God's provision to make possible his presence among his people.

'And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst ... There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel. (Exodus 25:8, 22)

Exodus ends with the glory of God descending onto the tabernacle and Leviticus begins, almost without a break, with the Lord calling to Moses from the tent of meeting (1:1).

³ Derek Tidball, *The Message of Leviticus*, BST (IVP, 2005), p. 26.

So the book of Leviticus begins with the presence of the dangerously holy God among his people giving instructions for the method of approach. Wenham argues that the presence of God is a key theme in understanding the book of Leviticus. The sacrifices only make sense in conjunction with the immanently present God who speaks to Moses from the tent and who is close enough to smell the pleasing aroma from the burnt offerings.

Leviticus 26:11 repeats the themes of Exodus 19:4-6: God promises to dwell with his people if they obey his commands and statutes. More explicitly, Leviticus 16:2 reminds us that it is dangerous to enter the presence of God without his prescribed method. The death of Aaron's sons in chapter 10 drives home the point that approaching God on our own terms ends in death. In 15:31 the theme of God's presence through the tabernacle underpins the need for the Israelites to be separated from their uncleanness through the sacrificial system, and specifically through the Day of Atonement, lest they die.

In short, Leviticus describes how the people are to continue living with the problem of approaching the holy God in their midst who they met on the mountain. Atonement, as we shall see, makes sense when it is understood as the solution to this problem within the sacrificial system. The system makes sense against the background of 'the holiness spectrum'.

The holiness spectrum

With God living among his people, all of life was radically redefined with reference to his holiness. Leviticus divides the world into categories of holy and common. Common things are further divided into clean and unclean things. This scheme operated as a spectrum or grid which was laid over all areas of life, categorising food, health, objects and practices. It was the priest's role ;to distinguish between the holy and the common and between the clean and the unclean' (10:10).

The leading category was of course holiness because God is holy: 'be holy for I am holy' (11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26). Everything that was not holy was common. Anything unclean could not come in to contact with holy things. Holiness and uncleanness were, as it were, contagious. And the two could never meet without consequences for the unclean person (7:20-21 and 22:3). Common things operated as a middle category; as the norm from which holiness and uncleanness were departures. Common things could be sanctified and so made holy or they could be polluted and so made unclean by sin, infirmity or contact with unclean things. Holy things could be profaned and so reduced to the category of common and then polluted and so reduced to the category of unclean.

Leviticus details how these categories apply to life and also how movement between these categories is achieved. Some things are permanently holy or unclean, but others can move up and down the scale. Movement down the scale happened through sin, infirmity and contact with unclean things. Movement up the scale happened through the sacrificial system. Through sacrifice unclean things were cleansed and common things were sanctified. Wenham summarises the spectrum and the nature of the movement up and down in the following diagram.⁴



⁴ Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 29.

Wenham also helpfully summarises what these categories mean. He argues that common or clean defines normality and that normality is a key concept within the theology of Leviticus. Wenham cites the diagnostic tests for skin diseases in chapter 13 that were conducted by the priests as part of the process of declaring sufferers clean. He points out that the tests determined that the sufferer was clean but that did not always mean they were free from all skin ailments. There was in the system the notion that some skin conditions categorised a person as unclean, but others were less serious and did not warrant a category change. Wenham likens the less serious skin diseases to the kind that a doctor would distinguish as quite normal and nothing to worry about. It follows that to be restored to cleanness is to be declared normal rather than completely free from all ailments.

The idea that cleanness equates with normality helps explain the nature of what is included within the category unclean. Wenham says:

Temporary uncleanness may result from contact with corpses, childbirth, disease, discharges (chs. 11-15), and various sins including illicit sexual intercourse (ch. 18) and murder (Numbers. 35:33). All these different types of uncleanness are regarded as in some way abnormal, or at least not quite usual. The greater the deviation from the norm, the greater is the degree of uncleanness and the difficulty in cleansing.⁵

The argument extends to permanently unclean things like certain animals in chapter 11. Wenham argues that animals which move around in a ‘manner appropriate to their class’ (v. 20) are clean. This therefore excludes fish without fins and scales who move around by alternative methods.

All of life was structured in this way around the presence of God and, as one moved further out of his presence into ways of life that diverged from holiness, one moved towards death, disorder and uncleanness.

The notion of normality explains the category of holiness as that which is better than normal – as complete, whole and perfect. Wenham presents the argument of Mary Douglas who suggests that holiness requires that priests be physically without deformity and that people, species, objects and so on conform to their class or category.⁶ For instance, sexual activity with animals is prohibited (18:23) and the mixing of seeds in fields, different breeds of cattle breeding and mixing fabrics in a garment are all prohibited (19:19). In other words, holiness demands completeness, wholeness, perfection, and order instead of confusion, deformity or departure from the norm. Philip Jenson argues that, as one moves away from holiness toward uncleanness, one is also moving from order to chaos.⁷ He argues that this sliding scale of order toward chaos mapped onto geographic locations with reference to the holy of holies. Jenson suggests that there were five zones which had a standing in regard to holiness. The holy of holies was *very holy*. Second, the holy place (the court of the tabernacle) was *holy*. Third, the camp was *clean*. Fourth, outside the camp was *unclean*. And lastly, the wilderness was *very unclean*. The holiness spectrum describes the ordered and normal, clean and holy life that is fitting for people living in the presence of God from spatial location to

⁵ Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 29.

⁶ Cited in Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, pp. 23-25.

⁷ Cited in Tidball, *The Message of Leviticus*, pp. 26-27.

food and practice. All of life was structured in this way around the presence of God and, as one moved further out of his presence into ways of life that diverged from holiness, one moved towards death, disorder and uncleanness.

It is against this background that atonement makes sense as the key element of the process of cleansing, forgiveness and restoration through the sacrificial system. It is worth noting that, if Douglas, Wenham and Jenson are correct, then atonement deals with more than sin alone. It has to do with the restoration of the world to the order and completeness of life lived in God's presence. As part of the cleansing process (e.g. ch. 14) it is part of the restoration of people to order, completeness and normality as well as forgiveness. This throws us forward to the New Testament and the effect of Christ's own sacrifice as the method by which God was dealing with sin, but was also reordering creation by reconciling all things in heaven and on earth to himself (Colossians 1:20) so that in Christ all things might be united (Ephesians 1:10).

Sacrifice and atonement

Leviticus 1-16 details the sacrificial system and ends with the Day of Atonement as the pivotal point in the book⁸. In these chapters five offerings are described: the burnt offering (ch. 1); the cereal or grain offering (ch. 2); the peace offering (ch. 3); the sin offering (ch. 4:1- 5:13); and the guilt offering (ch. 5:14-6:7).

The sacrificial system works within the framework of holiness to keep the people separate from their uncleanness so that the tabernacle can be kept undefiled (15:31) in order that God can continue to dwell with his people. Atonement, which is achieved through the sacrificial system, has to be understood as the precursor to the forgiveness and cleansing which move people from a state of uncleanness and into the category of cleanness fit for the presence of God. It allows the forgiveness of sins, but also the declaration of cleanness which speaks of the restoration of order. Atonement, then, has to do with the removal of sin and uncleanness as defined by the holiness spectrum in order to live in the presence of God.

How specifically is this achieved?

The closest Leviticus comes to a direct statement on the definitive effective component of the sacrificial system is in 17:11: 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.' Here it seems that the blood of the animal is the key component in achieving atonement. Wenham, Stott and Morris all argue, however, that the substitutionary death of the animal is in view here.⁹ The blood is an essential part, but its essence is that it is the evidence of a life given. The sacrifice makes atonement *by the life* given up. Although there is debate around the exact definition of the word atonement, Peterson¹⁰ and Wenham¹¹ favour 'ransom'. This is how it is generally used in the Old Testament outside the cultic context and this makes sense of the cultic use in the book of Leviticus. Leviticus 17:11 therefore presents atonement as the ransom of a life by the payment or giving of a life.

It is the entire sacrificial death of the animal that achieves atonement rather than one component. This is born out by the connection that other passages make between atonement and other parts of the sacrificed animal. For instance in 4:26 it seems to be the fat of the animal that completes the atonement: 'And all its fat he shall burn on the altar, like the fat of the sacrifice of

⁸ Peterson, 'The Atonement in Scripture'.

⁹ Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, pp. 25-29; John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, 1986), p. 138 and Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (IVP, 1983), p. 53.

¹⁰ Peterson, 'The Atonement in Scripture'.

¹¹ Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, pp. 28, 59-63.

peace offerings. So the priest shall make atonement for him for his sins, and he shall be forgiven' (see also 4:31 and 35). Similarly 1:4 indicates that in burnt offerings it is the moment when the sinner lays his hands on the head of the animal that makes the sacrifice effective for atonement.

All parts of the sacrificial rituals are therefore important to understand atonement. Leon Morris¹² describes five or six stages of the sacrificial process of all four major sacrifices (he counts the grain and cereal offerings in with the other sacrifices as they accompanied them rather than stood alone). The sin, guilt and peace offering all have six stages in common; the burnt offering has only five stages. In the first three there needed to be a disposal of the carcass. The burnt offering, however, disposes of the entire carcass by its nature and therefore finishes one stage before the others. Morris discerns the following six stages:

1. The bringing near of the animal. Morris argues that this was a significant moment for the sinner as it symbolised obedience to God in seeking atonement.
2. The laying on of hands. This symbolized the sinner's identification with the animal and, in the case of the two goats on the Day of Atonement, symbolised the transfer of sin to the animal.
3. The killing of the animal. This was conducted by the worshipper unless it was a bird being offered in which case it was performed by the priest.
4. The manipulation of the blood. Morris argues that this is the priest's key role. The blood of the burnt offering and the peace offering was poured against the side of the altar. The use of blood for the sin offering, however, was more complex. If the sin offering was made for the priest and the congregation then it was sprinkled seven times in front of the curtain to the holy of holies. Some was then put on the horns of the altar of incense and the rest poured on the side of the altar where burnt offerings were made. If the sin offering was for a ruler or an individual then the sprinkling of blood in front of the curtain was omitted. The guilt offering seems to have followed the sin offering although Morris points out that what happens at this stage in the guilt offering is not clear from Leviticus. It is clear that blood from the guilt offering along with the sin offering and burnt offering were fundamental parts of the cleansing process for skin diseases (Leviticus 14) and other temporary uncleanness.
5. The burning on the altar. At this stage the entire burnt offering is burnt. Only parts of the sin, guilt and peace offerings were burnt (4:8-10, 26, 31, 35).
6. The disposal of the carcass outside the camp (except in the case of the burnt offering). Certain parts of the sin offering for the priest and the congregation were burnt on the altar and the rest of the carcass (the hide, flesh, head, legs and offal) was taken outside the camp to a clean place to be burnt (4:11-12, 19-20). The flesh was eaten by the priests as part of a sin offering for individuals who were not priests. It is not clear what happens with the guilt offering, but it seems at this point to be closely associated with the sin offering. At this stage in the peace offering the same parts of the carcasses were burnt as in the sin offering, but specific parts of the flesh were eaten by the priests (the breast and the left thigh; 7:31-34). The rest of the flesh was eaten as a feast by the worshipping congregation as a fellowship meal.

Through the sacrificial system, the holiness spectrum and through the priestly inspection of cleanliness, the worshipper had a multi-sensory experience of the nature of sin and uncleanness, and the consequences of sin as they lived in the presence of the holy God. The whole system required the acknowledgement of sin (for example, 4:13-14), the carrying out of punishment by death on a substitute, the spreading of blood in the act of cleansing and the constant burning of carcasses. All combine to

¹² Leon Morris, *The Atonement*, pp. 45-50.

produce a concrete experience of sights, smells and participation in the atonement process.

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Wenham suggests that the burnt, sin and guilt offerings taken together offer three views of sin and the consequence of sin.¹³

The burnt offering gives a personal picture of the guilty sinner who deserves to die before a holy God and who is substituted for an animal. This picture is particularly powerful since the sinner themselves kill the animal in their place as a ransom. These offerings were burnt every morning and evening, constantly reminding the people of the need to be reconciled to God.

The sin offering gives a medical-hygiene picture. The world is polluted by sin, particularly the tabernacle. The sprinkling of blood cleanses the uncleanness from the place of God's presence, making it possible for him to remain with his people. It is offered for uncleanness and 15:31 seems to have the tabernacle as the main concern. Wenham argues that the sin offering was primarily for the purity of the temple, soiled as it was by the presence of unclean people, rather than the sinner. He suggests that the burnt offering is a stronger candidate for the illustration of a life for a life since it was offered daily while the sin offering was less frequent.

The guilt offering presents a commercial picture of the cost of sin and the need for reparation. In other words, the sacrifice pays the debt. Indeed some financial recompense was also involved (for example, 6:5)

In each case atonement is made by the sacrifice. Leviticus informs our understanding of atonement as substitutionary sacrifice for ransom, cleansing and debt payment. When atonement is made, sins are cleansed, life is bought and a debt is paid. It presents a total remedy for a sinful, unclean people called to be a holy nation in the presence of a holy God. It is clear, however, that the sacrifices were not enough to do the job. Once a year a day was set aside for temple cleansing and sin removal: the Day of Atonement.

The Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement described in chapter 16 of Leviticus is the centre piece, or pivotal point, of the book. It ends the description of the laws of sacrifice. The rest of the book then turns to topics around practical holiness for the nation. The chief concern of the day is the cleansing tabernacle for God to remain with the people. Just before the Day of Atonement is introduced, we discover that the primary reason for separating people from their uncleanness is so they do not defile the tabernacle and die (15:31). In 16:1 God presents the details of the Day of Atonement for Moses to pass on to Aaron *after* the death of Aaron's sons which occurs in chapter 10. Thus the topic of the Day of Atonement is raised with reference to a wrong approach to God. The account then begins in 16:2 by highlighting the danger of Aaron going into the Holy of Holies. It is not introduced first and foremost in terms of the need to deal with the sin of the individual.

¹³ Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, p. 111.

The Day of Atonement is therefore presented primarily as a solution to the problem of entering the presence of God while unclean. As Morris says ‘the line of approach is not “This is the way the sins of Israel are remitted” but rather “This is the way the high priest may enter the holy of holies”.’¹⁴ Morris points out that the writer to the Hebrews takes the same approach in Hebrews 9, casting the death of Christ as the solution to the problem of access into the Holy of Holies (see Hebrews 9:8, 12). Morris¹⁵ is careful to point out that there is clearly a crucial connection between the problem of sin and the problem of access to God’s presence. It is sin after all that blocks access. The point, however, stands that sin is primarily a problem because it blocks access to God’s presence and makes it lethal to enter the Holy of Holies without a solution to the problem.

The Day of Atonement was the one day in the year when the priest could enter the holy of holies. On all the other days he would offer sacrifices at the bronze altar and sprinkle blood on the curtain to the Holy of Holies and the altar of incense in front of it without ever actually entering. On the Day of Atonement, after a ritual bathing, the priest would take for himself and his household a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for burnt offering. For the congregation he took two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering (16:3-5). He was to enter the presence of the Lord who would appear over the mercy seat (or atonement cover) on top of the ark between the two cherubim (16:2). Under cover of smoke from incense, the priest would offer the blood of the young bull as a sacrifice of atonement for himself and his household, and then the blood of one of the goats for the congregation by sprinkling it with his finger over the mercy seat. The priest then applied the blood to other parts of the tabernacle.

The result of these sin offerings is described in verse 16 in terms of the effects on the tabernacle and its furniture: ‘Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins.’ It suggests the primary function of the Day of Atonement as concerned with the defilement of the tabernacle.

It was the second goat (the other unique feature of the Day of Atonement alongside entry to the holy of Holies) that was reserved as a visual aid concerning the sin of the people. The second goat was called the ‘scapegoat’ as it was sent into the wilderness after the priest had laid his hands on the animal and confessed the sins of the people. The whole ritual symbolised the transfer and the removal of the sins of the people to the place well beyond the camp (16:10, 20-22).

The use of two goats, one as a sin offering for the atonement of sins and the second as the scapegoat which carries the sins away, illustrates the problem of pinning the achievement of atonement to one particular aspect of the ritual. The goats both seem to deal with and therefore atone for sin. Leviticus suggests the whole day in all its aspects was necessary for atonement and allowing access into the presence of God through the cleansing of the temple. The Day of Atonement presents us with an understanding of the atonement in terms of access to God and forgiveness through sacrifice.

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *The Atonement*, p. 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Summary

Atonement in Leviticus must be seen, first, in the context of the wider story of redemption: God saving a people among whom he will dwell. Second, it must be seen in the context of the holiness spectrum. Third, atonement must be seen in the context of the sacrificial system. These three 'contexts' fit inside each other such that atonement solves the problem of a holy God dwelling with a sinful people. Yet this problem itself is further defined by the holiness spectrum and the sacrificial system which present the terms of the solution and so shape the nature of atonement. The sacrificial system as presented in Leviticus tells us that atonement involves a ransom, cleansing and debt payment for sin and a restoration of order so that God's people can continue to live in his presence.

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