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Pure Violence: Sacrifice and Defilement in Ancient Israel

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The goal of this investigation may be stated simply. We present here some preliminary reflections on the dynamic between two sets¹ of biblical ritual structures that are intricately interrelated: defilement and sacrifice.²

¹I use the word “sets” here advisedly. Much of my own work has argued that the Hebrew Bible presents us with two purity systems: the “ritual” one, which is concerned with natural and unavoidable defilements, and the “moral” one, which is concerned with the defiling force of sexual transgression, idolatry, and murder. See Klawans, “The Impurity of Immorality in Ancient Judaism,” *JJS* 48 (1997) 1–16, and *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). The plural, “systems,” also may well apply to sacrifices: some sacrifices are performed inside the sanctuary (e.g., burnt offerings), and some sacrifices are performed outside (e.g., the Passover offering [Exod 12]). Moreover, some offerings are performed daily, and some are performed seasonally; some are obligatory and some are optional. It ought not to be assumed that any theory or explanation could account for all of these types of sacrifices and offerings, not all of which even involve blood or altars. Hence, we will speak here provisionally of sacrificial systems, while particular attention will be paid to certain types of animal sacrifice.

²The bibliography on sacrifice in ancient Israel is too vast to be surveyed briefly, to say nothing of the literature concerned with sacrifice in other religious traditions. We note here some works with a particularly useful, important, or distinctive approach. On sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible in general, see Gary A. Anderson, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman; 6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 5:870–86, and H. H. Rowley, “The Meaning of Sacrifice in the Old Testament,” in *From Moses to Qumran* (New York: Association Press, 1963) 67–107. A more detailed survey of biblical sacrificial rituals can be found in Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) 415–56 and *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964). The classic theories of E. B. Tyler, J. G. Frazer, and W. Robertson Smith are

That sacrifice and ritual purity are structurally interrelated can hardly be denied. The two are juxtaposed in the text of Leviticus, and ritual purity is a prerequisite for those who come to the sanctuary to offer sacrifices, for those (priests) who regularly officiate at sacrifices, and for any animals which are to be offered as sacrifices. Ritual impurity, by definition, is associated with those phenomena that are barred from the sanctuary. Sacrifice, also by definition, involves many events that—especially according to the priestly traditions—can occur *only* in the sanctuary. As Victor Turner advised some time ago, sacrifice should be understood as a process with several stages.³ Turner was following Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, who devoted part of their classic 1898 essay to describing the processes of “sacralization” and purification that precede sacrifice.⁴ For Leviticus, that process of sacrifice begins with the processes of ritual purification. Clearly, an integrated approach to purity and sacrifice is a desideratum. Yet integrated approaches to purity and sacrifice, especially with regard to the Hebrew Bible, are difficult to find.

discussed in the works by Anderson and de Vaux cited above. Perhaps the most enduring of the older works on sacrifice is Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). For surveys of recent works on sacrifice in general, see *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Richard D. Hecht, “Studies on Sacrifice, 1970–1980,” *Religious Studies Review* 8 (1982) 253–59; and Ivan Strenski, “Between Theory and Speciality: Sacrifice in the 90’s,” *Religious Studies Review* 22 (1996) 10–20. A convenient discussion of many biblical sacrificial rituals within the context of their physical and social setting can be found in Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1985). For a sensitive treatment of priestly rituals building largely on the work of Victor Turner, see Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990). Important discussions of the terminology of sacrificial rituals and texts can be found in Gary A. Anderson, *Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel: Studies in their Social and Political Importance* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) and Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974). For an analysis of ancient Israelite sacrifice through the lens of gender studies, see Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). But compare the critique in Strenski, “Sacrifice in the 90’s,” 13–14. Useful discussions of sacrifice can also be found in some recent commentaries on Leviticus, including, in particular, Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1992) and Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1979). The bibliography that informs my understanding of purity in ancient Israel can be found in my articles devoted to that subject, including “The Impurity of Immorality,” and my book, *Impurity and Sin*.

³Victor Turner, “Sacrifice as Quintessential Process: Prophylaxis or Abandonment?” *History of Religions* 16 (1977) 189–215.

⁴Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, esp. 19–32; Anderson, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT),” 871.

Not only are integrated approaches hard to find, but these two sets of systems—defilements and sacrifices—are often treated rather differently by scholars. Since Mary Douglas wrote *Purity and Danger* in the '60s, most scholars studying the dietary laws and the purity system(s) of ancient Israel have recognized the need to treat these as symbolic structures.⁵ The laws serve functions, to be sure, but they may also express fundamental cultural ideas about the body, cosmology, and perhaps even justice.⁶

Yet when scholars turn back to the first ten chapters of Leviticus, Mary Douglas's general insights tend to get left behind. Comparatively speaking, scholarship on the Hebrew Bible exhibits very little interest in the possibility that sacrificial rituals could be profitably analyzed as symbolic systems.⁷ There are, of course, symbolic explorations of a "piecemeal" sort: for instance, one can find examinations of the symbolic value of the color red in the red-heifer ritual.⁸ There are also,

⁵Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). Virtually every subsequent treatment of purity in the Hebrew Bible has reckoned with the possibilities raised by Douglas's insights. One noteworthy treatment, with ample bibliography, can be found in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁶For purity rules as expressing notions concerning body and cosmos, see Douglas, *Purity and Danger* and Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*. With regard to purity and its symbolic relation to justice, see Douglas "The Forbidden Animals in Leviticus," *JSOT* 59 (1993) 3–23 and "Holy Joy: Rereading Leviticus: The Anthropologist and the Believer," *Conservative Judaism* 46 (1994) 3–14.

⁷Mary Douglas herself gave little attention to sacrifice in her earlier work on purity. But Douglas was not then involved in the analysis of Leviticus as a whole or biblical religion as a topic in and of itself. What remains curious is that so many who adopted or at least discussed her methods with regard to purity chose not to do so with regard to sacrifice. Among the above noted commentaries, this is true of Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, and Wenham, *Leviticus*. See also, e.g., Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996) and Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989). Even Eilberg-Schwartz gives sacrifice only scant attention in *The Savage in Judaism*. There are, to be sure, some attempts to apply Douglas's methods to sacrifice. These include Douglas Davies, "An Interpretation of Sacrifice in Leviticus," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament* (ed. Bernhard Lang; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 151–62 and Edmund Leach, "The Logic of Sacrifice," in *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 81–94; also printed in *Anthropological Approaches* (ed. Bernhard Lang; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 136–50. For an excellent methodological discussion of the significance of *Purity and Danger* with regard to the study of sacrifice in general and Greek sacrifice in particular, see G. S. Kirk, "Some Methodological Pitfalls in the Study of Ancient Greek Sacrifice (in Particular)," in *Le Sacrifice dans L'antiquité: huit exposés suivis de discussions* (ed. Olivier Reverdin, et al.; Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1981) 41–80.

⁸See Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1003.

to be sure, symbolic explorations of the most general sort: for instance, one can find analyses that look through and beyond the details of varied sacrificial rites and narratives, and find a fundamental sameness in all of them, which can then be analyzed symbolically.⁹ But very few scholars seem to be interested in the possibility that the ancient Israelite sacrificial rules could profitably be analyzed as part of a complex set of interlocking symbolic systems.¹⁰ I have in mind here the kind of work that Marcel Detienne, Jean-Pierre Vernant, and their colleagues at the Paris Center for Comparative Studies of Ancient Societies have produced in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks*.¹¹ Mary Douglas's latest treatment of Leviticus holds the promise of moving us in this direction.¹²

What we generally find in analyses of sacrifice in ancient Israel is, rather, a concern with the origins of sacrifice, and this concern takes two forms. One is the standard discussion—found in numerous commentaries—of gifts, food, and communion. The other is the Girardian search for the original murder which accounts for all subsequent sacrificial rituals.¹³ The question of the origins of sacrifice is doubtless one of the most important—and fascinating—questions in the field of religious studies. Yet in truth, the question of origins is largely irrelevant to the task of the biblical commentator. When dealing with the food laws or the purity systems, scholars have long avoided getting sidetracked by an investigation into the origins of dietary restriction or the menstrual taboo. When dealing with circumcision in the Hebrew Bible, very few have felt the need to explore the early history of human body marking. But when dealing

⁹I have in mind here the works of René Girard. See n.13 below.

¹⁰There are exceptions, of course: one recent work which treats sacrifice (but not impurity) symbolically is Gary Anderson's *Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel*; cf. also Ronald S. Hendel, "Sacrifice as a Cultural System: The Ritual Symbolism of Exodus 34, 3–8," *ZAW* 101 (1989) 366–90.

¹¹(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹²*Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Mary Douglas's completed volume arrived only after this article was already complete. My assessment of *Leviticus as Literature* will appear as a review essay in a forthcoming volume of the *AJS Review*.

¹³René Girard, "Generative Scapegoating," in Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins*, 73–105; Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); and *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); cf. James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). On Girard and his work, see Burton Mack's introduction to Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins*, 6–22; cf. Ninian Smart's review of *Violence and the Sacred* in *Religious Studies Review* 6 (1980) 173–77. See also Hecht, "Studies on Sacrifice, 1970–1980," 257–58; Luc de Heusch, *Sacrifice in Africa: A Structuralist Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) esp. 15–17; and Ivan Strenski, "At Home with René Girard: Eucharistic Sacrifice, the 'French School' and Joseph De Maistre," in *Religion in Relation: Method, Application, and Moral Location* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 202–16.

with sacrifice, the Girardian search for the original murder remains of great interest in some scholarly circles. For those not under the Girardian spell, concerns with the pre-history of sacrifice in earlier notions of gifts, food, and blood ties frequently dominate the discussion. The problem is that when the concern with origins predominates, the search for meaningful symbolic structures is eclipsed. Moreover, all too frequently, interest in the origins of sacrifice results in an evolutionary analysis. Scholars first speculate on the meaning of sacrifice at its origins—for instance, that it was originally understood as divine food. Then they find only the faintest echoes of such primitive ideas in the Hebrew Bible—for instance, that the Israelites did not really conceive of sacrifices as divine food anymore (Ps 50:12–13, but cf., e.g., Lev 3:11).¹⁴ According to this evolutionary approach, the achievement of the Israelites lies precisely in the fact that sacrifice no longer means to them what it meant to those who preceded them. For those who take this approach, sacrifice in ancient Israel remains as a meaningless, vestigial ritual, a relic from a more primitive era.¹⁵

So the question arises: why do some of the very same scholars, who look at the food laws and the purity regulations and see the need to find a key to unlock a complex symbolic system, look at sacrifice as a fossilized vestige, bereft—finally—of whatever foolish meanings it once had? If the ritual purity system—the prerequisite for sacrifice—can be understood as symbolic, might it not be reasonable to understand the sacrificial system(s) similarly? But scholars dislike sacrifice too much to give this possibility the benefit of the doubt.

Those scholars who view sacrifice as an empty vestige represent one constituency of the antisacrificial public; Girard and his followers represent another. That Girard and those who follow in his footsteps dislike sacrifice is relatively well-known and well-documented.¹⁶ Girard also dislikes impurity as much as he dislikes sacrifice: throughout his work, impurity is equated with violence.¹⁷ Thus, to his credit, we

¹⁴So argues Yehezkel Kaufmann in his *Toledot ha-Emunah ha-Yisraelit* (8 vols.; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1937–1958) 2. 396–403, 560–574; cf. *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) 53–55; 110–15. Roland de Vaux's approach is similarly evolutionist, cf. *Studies*, esp. 38–42. For a more recent articulation of similar views, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 440. For a critique of this kind of approach, see Anderson, *Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel*, 14–19 and “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT),” 572.

¹⁵Cf. the statement of Milgrom in *Leviticus 1–16*, 1003: when considering the question of why Israelites continued to perform sacrificial rites, he responds, “What choice did they have?”!

¹⁶See, e.g., “Generative Scapegoating,” 107; *Things Hidden*, 443–44; and *The Scapegoat*, 140. Cf. Bruce Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program Within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992) 15–25, 163–72; cf. also Chilton, “The Hungry Knife: Towards a Sense of Sacrifice,” in Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, *Jesus in Context: Temple, Purity, and Restoration* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997) 91–108.

¹⁷See *Violence and the Sacred*, esp. 28–38; cf. Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred: Poetics of Violence in Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 145 (here summarizing Girard's approach): “The essential ingredient in all ritual pollution is violence.”

can say that Girard's approach does take both purity and sacrifice into account. Yet the Girardian approach leaves much to be desired. As Bruce Chilton recently wrote, "Girard makes sacrifice in the ancient world the scapegoat for violence in modern experience."¹⁸ Girard's focus on sacrifice as "generative scapegoating" operates under the assumption that all sacrifice involves the killing of innocent victims.¹⁹ But the reader must beware that whenever scholars put the "innocent victims" of sacrificial ritual in the foreground, a cadre of "guilty priests" must be lurking in the background. The Girardian approach to sacrifice operates under assumptions that are both antisacrificial and antipriestly. This is hardly a good starting point for anyone trying to understand what sacrificial rituals might have meant to those who believed in their efficacy.²⁰ More troubling is the fact that Girard's concern with Jesus as the paradigmatic innocent victim compels him to view Christianity as the necessary completion of Judaism.²¹ Furthermore, in his analysis of Jesus' death, Girard squarely places much of the blame on Jewish authorities and on the (Jewish) crowd, without entertaining the possibility that post-crucifixion conflicts between Jesus' followers and other Jews may have influenced the construction of the passion narratives.²² What is latent in Girard's work becomes more explicit elsewhere: there are some who push the Girardian approach further, articulating interpretations of sacrifice which are explicitly supersessionistic, and which impute to ancient Jews a fair degree of guilt for the killing of various innocent victims in the first century C.E. and earlier, through the killing of Jesus, and more simply through the performance of ancient Israelite ritual.²³

¹⁸Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus*, 25.

¹⁹Girard, "Generative Scapegoating," 121; *Things Hidden*, 231; *The Scapegoat*, 147, 179, 212. Cf. also the critique of Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus*, 24–25.

²⁰Contrast the more neutral and more productive approach taken in Detienne and Vernant, eds., *The Cuisine of Sacrifice*; cf. Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus*, 41. One advantage of the "sacrifice as a meal" metaphor (argued for in these works) over the "sacrifice as killing innocent victims" metaphor is that the question of the innocence or guilt of the animal becomes irrelevant. The animal is not innocent or guilty, but a source of food.

²¹See e.g., Girard, *Things Hidden*, 158; *The Scapegoat*, 101, 103, 147, 165, 205; cf. the critique in Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 327–28, n. 30. Boyarin's comments could also apply to supersessionistic comments by one of Girard's followers; see Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, 175–76.

²²See e.g., Girard, *Things Hidden*, 167; *The Scapegoat*, 100–11, 210–11; cf. the critique in Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus*, 25. Generally on Jesus' death, see John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995); see esp. 36.

²³I have in mind here particularly Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred and Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). See Daniel Boyarin's pointed critique in *A Radical Jew*, 214–19; 327–28, nn. 24–31.

Stated briefly, the current scene is marked by three phenomena: (1) although there are exceptions—Girard among them—the ritual structures of sacrifice and defilement are rarely studied in tandem. (2) The two sets of systems, moreover, are studied differently. Purity regulations are generally recognized to consist of complex symbolic systems. Sacrificial rituals are generally understood as empty vestiges, being either metaphorized feedings of God or the fallout from the violent crisis that caused the origin of culture. This state of affairs may be related to the fact that (3) sacrifice itself has become the innocent victim of antipriestly and antiritual perspectives, and in a few notable cases, perspectives that are even more pernicious.

To make further progress in the study of sacrifice, we might need to consider the possibility that sacrifice can be both meaningful and symbolic. How do we approach the case of ancient Israelite sacrifice? First, we need to set aside for now discussions of both the origins of Israelite sacrifice (i.e., sacrifice as food) and the aftermath (i.e., the death of Jesus, and the concern for the “innocent victim”). Second, in order to understand the priestly perspective on sacrifice, we need to expand our scope to take into consideration some of the other significant priestly ritual structures—in particular, the purity systems.²⁴ Third, we need to look for ways to bring together as much of this evidence as possible. We do not really need a “theory” per se, because we make no claim to advance the understanding of sacrifice in any context beyond the Hebrew Bible.²⁵ In fact, we do not even claim to explain all the sacrifices within the Hebrew Bible.²⁶ Most of the comments that follow pertain most directly to the daily burnt offering (Exod 29:38–45; Num 28:3–8; cf. Lev 1). Instead of proposing a theory, we will identify and illustrate two “organizing principles,”²⁷ two concerns central to the priestly traditions of the Pentateuch that will help us understand more fully the dynamic between the systems of sacrifice and defilement. One organizing principle is the concern with imitating God, and the other is the concern with attracting and maintaining the presence of God within the community. By focusing on these two concerns, we will be able to analyze our two sets of ritual structures—sacrifice and defilement—in tandem. We will, moreover, be able to do so using the

²⁴Expanding the scope even further—to take into account the food laws and the blood taboo—would be even better, but to demonstrate the value of a wider scope in an article-length study, we focus here on the purity system(s).

²⁵Compare the comments of Vernant, “A General Theory of Sacrifice,” in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), esp. 291.

²⁶See n. 1 above. We operate here under the assumption that sacrifice is a “multivalent entity” (Anderson, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings [OT],” 871).

²⁷Baruch A. Levine spoke of an “organizing principle” as an alternative to theory in his “Prolegomenon” to George Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: Its Theory and Practice* (1925; reprinted; New York: Ktav, 1971) vii–xliv, esp. xxxi.

same methodological assumption, which allows for the possibility that sacrificial rules could well be as symbolic as purity regulations are commonly believed to be.

■ Ritual Purity, Sacrifice, and *Imitatio Dei*

A number of theories have attempted to account for the varied nature of the substances viewed as ritually defiling in Leviticus 11–15 and Numbers 19. One popular theory sees death as the common denominator of the ritual purity system. Currently, the most articulate champion of this view is Jacob Milgrom, who, after reviewing the sources of ritual defilement, states:

The common denominator here is death. Vaginal blood and semen represent the forces of life; their loss—death. . . . In the case of scale disease [i.e., “leprosy”], this symbolism is made explicitly: Aaron prays for his stricken sister, “Let her not be like a corpse” (Num 12:12). Furthermore, scale disease is powerful enough to contaminate by overhang, and it is no accident that it shares this feature with the corpse (Num 19:14). The wasting of the body, the common characteristic of all biblically impure skin diseases, symbolizes the death process as much as the loss of blood and semen.²⁸

The importance of death as a common denominator of the avoidance regulations in priestly traditions can also be seen, perhaps, in the blood prohibition (Lev 17:10–14), in the elimination of carnivores from the diet of ancient Israel, and in the abhorrence of pigs, which played a role in Canaanite chthonic worship.²⁹ The purpose of the system, as Milgrom states elsewhere, is to drive a wedge between the forces of death, which are impure, and the forces of life which, like God, are holy.³⁰ This impurity-as-death “theory”—we could just as well call it a “metaphor” (see n. 59)—is by no means entirely new. Milgrom notes that a number of other scholars have focused on death in order to understand ritual impurity in ancient Israel.³¹

²⁸*Leviticus 1–16*, 766–68 and 1000–04; quote from 1002. For a recent survey of scholarly approaches to ritual impurity, see Philip Peter Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 75–83. For a critical discussion of the impurity as death theory, see Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 182–86, and 248, n. 16.

²⁹On the dietary laws in general as understood in this light, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 704–42, esp. 732–33 and 741–42. On the pig’s role in chthonic worship, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 649–53; on the blood prohibition, see Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual*, 181–89; and Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 704–13. For a critique of Milgrom’s approach in the context of a more general discussion of the dietary laws, see Walter Houston, *Purity and Monotheism: Clean and Unclean Animals in Biblical Law* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

³⁰*Leviticus 1–16*, 732–33.

³¹*Leviticus 1–16*, 766 and 1001–02. See for instance, Emanuel Feldman, *Biblical and Post-Biblical Defilement and Mourning: Law as Theology* (New York: Yeshiva University Press,

This view finds *partial* corroboration in the fact that death is problematized in other purity systems,³² although the view of death as impure and corpses as defiling is by no means universal. Some societies concerned with defilement problematize death, while others do not.³³

While few scholars deny the importance of death-avoidance to the biblical purity system, some questions remain. One concerns the relationship between death-avoidance and sex-avoidance. A second question concerns sacrifice. Indeed, the idea that death is central to the ritual purity system brings us to the riddle at the heart of our concerns. Why, if the ritual purity system is concerned with keeping death out of the sanctuary, does the sacrificial system involve precisely the opposite: the killing of animals, *in the sanctuary*?³⁴

Regarding the relationship between death and sex, the death-avoidance theory may well explain why individuals become ritually defiled when genital fluids are lost through nonsexual discharge from the body; surely the potential for life is lost in such situations. But it remains unclear whether the death-avoidance theory really explains the problematization of the sexual process itself. Does the fear of death really explain why sex and birth always defile? Moreover, why is it that the only substances which flow from the body and defile are sexual and/or genital in nature? Even blood flowing from the veins of a dying person is not ritually defiling! A number of scholars have convincingly argued, *contra* Milgrom, that the overarching concern with death-avoidance does not fully explain the particular concern with sexual/genital discharges. Tikva Frymer-Kensky and David Wright, among others, emphasize the important role that attitudes toward sexuality (but not necessarily gender) play in ancient Israel's perceptions of defilement.³⁵ Both

1977) 13–30. Regarding the ancient Israelite system, this view can be traced back at least as far as Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1874) 348–50.

³²See Anna S. Meigs, "A Papuan Perspective on Pollution," *Man* 13 (1978) 304–18, which Milgrom cites in his discussion (*Leviticus 1–16*, 1001). On the centrality of death to the Zoroastrian impurity system, see Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989) 16–19. Death also figures prominently in ancient Greek conceptions of impurity, see Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) 32–73.

³³In ancient Egyptian religion, for instance, corpses were purified in order to secure their safe passage into the next world, but corpses were not considered a source of ritual defilement for the living. Indeed, corpses were brought into sanctuaries; see Aylward M. Blackman, "Purification (Egyptian)," *ERE* 10 (1919) 476–82.

³⁴This same question is also posed by Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 186.

³⁵Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Pollution, Purification, and Purgation in Biblical Israel," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of his Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 399–410 esp. 401; Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and*

of these scholars argue, with different emphases, that both death *and* sex figure in the ritual purity system of ancient Israel, and that the system serves to highlight the differences between humans and God. Because God is eternal, God does not die. As Wright puts it, “the mortal condition is incompatible with God’s holiness.”³⁶ Because God has no consort, God cannot have sex. Therefore, as Frymer-Kensky puts it, “in order to approach God, one has to leave the sexual realm.”³⁷ By separating from sex and death—by following the ritual purity regulations—ancient Israelites (and especially ancient Israelite priests and Levites) separated themselves from what made them the least God-like. In other words, the point of following these regulations is nothing other than the theological underpinning of the entire Holiness Code: *imitatio Dei* (Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26). Only a heightened, God-like state, the state of ritual purity, made one eligible to enter the sanctuary—God’s holy residence on earth. Here we come back to Hubert and Mauss, and their classic essay on sacrifice, in which, with regard to the process of “sacralization,” they said: “All that touches upon the gods must be divine; the sacrificer is obliged to become a god himself in order to be capable of acting upon them.”³⁸ The applicability of this observation to the priestly materials of the Pentateuch should now be manifest.

If this approach is moving in the right direction, we can perhaps learn more about the state of ritual purity by juxtaposing aspects of purity with certain depictions of God. In addition to God’s living eternally and having no consort, one important aspect of the characterization of God in the Hebrew Bible is his manifest power. Often, but by no means always, this is expressed in rather violent terms. God is a “man of war” (e.g., Exod 15:3),³⁹ who appears to the Israelites as a “consuming fire” (e.g., Exod 24:17), and who will—in the context of “holy

the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992) 189; and David P. Wright, “Unclean and Clean (OT),” *ABD* 6:729–41, esp. 739. See also Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 30–31, 49–50. On the more general question of the role of gender in the ritual purity system, see Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 178–82, and Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 38–41.

³⁶Wright, “Unclean and Clean,” 739; Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 189.

³⁷Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 189.

³⁸*Sacrifice*, 20; cf. 84–85.

³⁹Generally, on God as divine warrior, see Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) 91–215 and Patrick D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

war⁴⁰—travel with and before the Israelites as a “consuming fire” to “destroy” Israel’s enemies (e.g., Deut 9:3). References to God as a “consuming fire” appear in both sacrificial and holy war contexts;⁴¹ this phenomenon is one of many intersections between sacrificial and military ideologies in the Hebrew Bible.⁴² Indeed, in the (priestly) wilderness traditions, God’s residence finds its place in the midst of a war camp. Moreover, ritual purity is a prerequisite for holy war, just as it is for sacrifice.⁴³ This is not the place to pursue the possibility that holy war in the Hebrew Bible can be understood as doing God’s work and thus imitating his nature. But what ought to be noted here is this: the understanding of ritual purity in the broader perspective of *imitatio Dei* counters an important thread of the Girardian approach which we have already mentioned—namely, the blanket equation of ritual impurity and violence.⁴⁴ Rather, ritual purity highlights the ideas that God does not die and does not have sex. This understanding of ritual purity fits quite well with the traditions about holy war and the depiction of God as a man of war. Ritual purity is about avoiding sex and death; it has nothing to do with avoiding violence.

The notion of *imitatio Dei* can help us identify even more connections between related ritual structures in ancient Israel. Jon D. Levenson, building on Mircea Eliade’s temple-as-cosmos notion, has argued that the biblical narratives of tabernacle (and temple) construction take on a cosmic significance.⁴⁵ Among other evidence, Levenson notes how the language and structure of the tabernacle-construction narrative carefully recall the language and structure of Genesis 1.⁴⁶ In so doing, Levenson demonstrates that the priestly traditions understand tabernacle and temple construction as an act of *imitatio Dei*. If the building of the temple can be understood as an act of *imitatio Dei*, and if the process of preparation for the rituals that will take place there can be understood likewise, can this concept help us to better understand at least some aspects of ancient Israelite animal sacrifice?

⁴⁰Generally, on the concept of holy war see Gerhard Von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1991); de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 258–67; and Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴¹See, e.g., Exod 24:16–17; Lev 9:24, 10:2; Num 9:15; Deut 4:24, 9:3, 32:22; 1 Kgs 18:38; 2 Kgs 1:10, 12; and Lam 2:3.

⁴²On sacrificial aspects of holy war ideology see Niditch, *War*, esp. 28–55.

⁴³See, e.g., Deut 23:10–15 and 2 Sam 11:11; cf. Von Rad, *Holy War*, 42.

⁴⁴See *Violence and the Sacred*, 28–38; cf. Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred*, 145.

⁴⁵See Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954) 3–48.

⁴⁶Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 78–99 and 100–20, and *Sinai and Zion*:

It is precisely with regard to this point that the work of Eilberg-Schwartz is so important. Noting the conundrum that routine seminal discharge (Lev 15:16–18) is less problematized than genital discharges of blood (15:19–29) or flux (15:1–15), Eilberg-Schwartz introduces the criterion of controllability into the discussion of the meaning of ritual purity in ancient Israel.⁴⁷ Without denying the importance of the notions of sex and death, Eilberg-Schwartz suggests that controllability may play a role in determining both which substances defile and how severely they defile. Briefly stated, he argues that the less a process or event can be controlled, the more likely it is to defile. Thus excrement, which is highly controllable, is not ritually defiling at all. The same is true of the substances which exude from the upper parts of the body, like tears and saliva. Because their excretion is subject to human control, these substances were not considered defiling in ancient Israel. On the other hand, menstrual blood and nonseminal genital discharge are among the most defiling of substances, since they are least subject to human control.

Eilberg-Schwartz may push this criterion too far. Many kinds of uncontrollable behavior (e.g., vomiting, seizures) are not considered defiling at all, and many of the fluids which exude from upper parts of the body (e.g., mucous) are, at times, uncontrollable as well. To be fair, Eilberg-Schwartz does not present this criterion as a self-sustaining theory. He merely wants to add it to the list of criteria alongside death and sex.⁴⁸ Even if Eilberg-Schwartz pushes his theory beyond its limits, he still has presented a strong case that controllability plays some role in the purity system. And the importance of Eilberg-Schwartz's suggestion, for our purposes, can be seen when he brings sacrifice into his purview:⁴⁹

The importance of control in this system also suggests a way of understanding the otherwise paradoxical fact that one sacrifices animals as part of the process of cleansing oneself from the "death" of impurity. Lévi-Strauss has suggested that rituals often correct a situation by symbolically reversing it. . . . Sacrifice is the controllable spilling of blood; contamination is the result of some uncontrollable incident.

An Entry into the Jewish Bible (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 142–45. For some observations on *imitatio Dei* relating more directly to sacrifice, see also *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 25–32.

⁴⁷Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 186–94.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 189

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 188; Eilberg-Schwartz cites Lévi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 332–39. These observations are astute, but the thought is never fully developed. See also 134–36, where Eilberg-Schwartz presents his general approach to sacrifice which, though not strictly Girardian, remains entrenched in a conception of sacrifice as scapegoating.

I think Eilberg-Schwartz's observation is important, and can be pushed further. When we understand sacrifice as the controlled spilling of blood, we find a partial solution to the riddle we mentioned earlier: why, if death is defiling (and banned from the sacred) does the killing of animals find a central place within the sacred? Sacrifice is frequently described (or derided) as "violent," and it certainly is deadly and bloody. But the violence of sacrifice is not random or indiscriminate. Animal sacrifice in ancient Israel proceeds only in a very orderly and controlled way. The domesticated animals fit to be offered as sacrifices have no power whatsoever to resist: "Like a lamb to the slaughter" (Jer 11:19). That is why, at least in ancient Israel, sacrifice is very little like the hunt—the sacrificial animals chosen cannot put up much of a fight!⁵⁰

In ancient Israel, sacrifice involved the controlled exercise of complete power over an animal's life and death. This is precisely one of the powers that Israel's God exercises over human beings: "The Lord kills and brings to life" (1 Sam 2:6; cf. Deut 32:39). Yet exercising control over the death of a subordinate being is not the only aspect of sacrificial ritual that can be understood in light of *imitatio Dei*.

The sacrificial process begins, as we have already noted, with ritual purification, which can well be understood in light of *imitatio Dei*. Along with the process of purification comes a process of selection: the offerer and/or the officiating priest for each sacrificial ritual must *select* the animal which is to be sacrificed. This important and obvious step is frequently left out of both biblical and scholarly descriptions of sacrificial rituals. Even after the offerer has eliminated unfit animals in accordance with Leviticus 1, presumably more than one fit animal remains available—and that is when the selection of the animal truly takes place.⁵¹ Exodus 12 comes closest to describing this. There the Israelites' selection and watching over the animal to be consumed as a "Passover" offering (12:6) can be juxtaposed with God's guarding and watching over Israel in preparation for the tenth plague (12:42). Of course, the book of Leviticus more than once draws a connection between the human capacity to make distinctions and the divine power to do the same (Lev 10:10; 11:46–47).

⁵⁰This observation is not meant as a critique of Walter Burkert's brilliant works on archaic sacrifice and religion—to which I am greatly indebted—including *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) and *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). Origins are not of direct concern here. Whether or not sacrifice finds its origins in some form of the domestication of the hunt, it must be kept in mind that sacrifice is generally—and certainly in ancient Israel—performed on domesticated animals by agrarians and pastoralists. See Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," in Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins*.

⁵¹See Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 26, 29; Wenham, *Leviticus*, 55.

Once the animal is killed, we reach another major step that can be understood in light of *imitatio Dei*—the dissection of the animal. After the animal has been slaughtered, the offerer and the priests look into, examine, and dissect the animal's carcass. The offerer not only brings about the animal's death, but looks into the animal and separates it into its constituent parts—he decreates it. Although the basic regulations for this are laid out in Leviticus and elsewhere, there are very few descriptions of the image of an offerer or priest looking into the internal parts of an animal. The only relevant passages I know of can be found in Jeremiah, the Psalms, and a few other texts, that speak of God, who “examines the kidneys and heart” (בַּחֵן כָּל יִוֶּה וְלֵב) (Jer 11:20, 17:10, 20:12; Ps 7:10; Prov 17:3; 1 Chr 29:17). Perhaps a related image can be found in Isaiah 63:1–6, which depicts God wearing a garment stained with blood—as one would expect the priestly garments to be.⁵² Can we infer from these images that the priest—by looking into the animal—is doing divine work?

It is likely that some will resist the suggestion that sacrificial rituals may be better understood in light of images culled from prophetic literature. Some might suppose that passages like Jeremiah 11:20 do not really concern sacrifice at all because they are merely metaphorical.⁵³ We should not, however, quickly label these images as metaphors with the purpose of dismissing them from a discussion of the meaning of sacrificial rituals.⁵⁴ First of all, as long as the date of the priestly strand(s) of the Pentateuch remains a debated issue, it can by no means be assumed that the (presumably metaphorical) passages in Jeremiah or even the Psalms are later than the (presumably literal) descriptions of sacrificial rituals in Leviticus. Of course, this observation is really only relevant if we operate under the standard assumption that metaphors involve secondary and nonliteral usages which in some way extend beyond the original, literal usage of the terminology in question.⁵⁵ But the more one reflects on metaphor, the more one is impelled to rethink simplistic

⁵²I thank Jon D. Levenson for bringing this aspect of Isaiah 63 to my attention. Note, too, that a number of sacrificial terms appear in the passage: e.g., “daub” (v. 3) and “lean” (v. 5). See also Isaiah 34–35, for similar images and usages.

⁵³The metaphorical/figurative reading of these passages is so ingrained as to be adopted by many contemporary translations. The NJV reads “test the thoughts and the mind;” the NRSV reads: “who try the heart and mind;” the RSV reads “who triest the heart and the mind.” See also BDB s.v. “כָּל יוֹהֵ” For a more literal reading one must go back to the KJV, which reads: “that triest the reins and heart.” The idea that ancient Israelites believed the heart to be the center of thought (e.g., Deut 8:5 and 1 Kgs 2:44) is beside the point, because the translation of כָּל יוֹהֵ as “thoughts” as opposed to “kidneys” obscures the fact that the organs which are being examined in Jer 11:20 are precisely the same organs that figure prominently in sacrificial rituals (e.g., Lev 3:4, 10, 15).

⁵⁴The thrust of my work on ritual and moral impurity has been to counter an analogous trope in scholarship: the dismissal of Lev 18:24–30 and other such passages as metaphor.

⁵⁵Cf., e.g., the definitions of “metaphor” and “figurative” in the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

approaches.⁵⁶ A long-standing tradition in Western philosophy, going back to Aristotle, disparages metaphor as merely ornamental.⁵⁷ For more than forty years, however, a number of philosophers, linguists, and anthropologists have worked to rehabilitate metaphor, arguing that it is cognitive, meaningful, often primary and foundational, and so pervasive that it is inescapable.⁵⁸ We suggested above that the understanding of sacrifice has suffered because of antisacrificial biases in scholarship. It could equally be said that the understanding of Israelite sacrifice has suffered because antimetaphorical biases in biblical scholarship have eliminated sacrificial metaphors from the discussion.⁵⁹

It is no longer sound to assume that metaphor is historically secondary. Quite often, the reverse can be demonstrated, even within the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁰ One stunning example is the “dry bones” vision in Ezekiel 37. Here we find a meta-

⁵⁶For a useful and readable survey of the complex philosophical debates on metaphor and their impact on contemporary understandings of religious language, see Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, and Story* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), esp. 112–33. For more on philosophy and metaphor, see the helpful collection of essays in *On Metaphor* (ed. Sheldon Sacks; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), which contains seminal essays by, among others, Donald Davidson and Paul Ricoeur. On the linguistic side of the question, see Eva Feder Kittay, *Metaphor: Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987). For an anthropological perspective on metaphor, see, e.g., James W. Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), esp. 3–70 and Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962). For a brief survey of some of the relevant anthropological literature, with specific attention to biblical metaphors, see Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 115–40. Perhaps the most challenging (and the most readable) of contemporary philosophical work on metaphor is George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Another useful and readable work that is more directly related to the Hebrew Bible is G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980). Despite the fact that this work is often confessional (e.g., 271) and at times offensive (e.g., 143, where Jewish dietary laws are described as “tyranny”), it contains helpful discussions of meaning in general (35–84) and metaphor in particular (see 131–59).

⁵⁷On the antimetaphorical bias in Western philosophy, see Ted Cohen, “Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy,” in Sacks, *On Metaphor*, esp. 1–3; Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 189–92; and Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 8–13, 112–14.

⁵⁸See especially Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. See also Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances*, esp. 32–36, 58; Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, esp. 102; and Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 112–133. On biblical metaphors in particular, see Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, esp. 117–21.

⁵⁹This statement needs to be qualified. Some sacrificial metaphors, such as those which we catalogue here, are systematically ignored. Other sacrificial metaphors, such as the analogy between sacrifices and gifts (e.g., Num 18:12) or between sacrifice and food (e.g., Ezek 44:16), receive attention. But these metaphors have been elevated arbitrarily to the level of “theory.” This observation on the fluidity between “theory” and “metaphor” vis-à-vis sacrifice is based on Leach, “The Logic of Sacrifice.”

⁶⁰Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 185–97.

phorical reference to the resurrection of the dead which by virtually all accounts comes hundreds of years before the time when ancient Israelites literally believed in any notion of resurrection of the dead.⁶¹ Likewise, it is no longer methodologically sound to dismiss metaphor as merely ornamental. At the very least, it must be taken seriously. It must also be recognized that metaphor, even when historically secondary, frequently *expands* the meanings and usages of words and concepts, thereby influencing both behavior and beliefs.⁶² Consider, for instance, one of the few biblical metaphors that is generally treated properly: the prophetic comparison of God's covenant with Israel to a marriage between a man and a woman (e.g., Hos 1–2). This is clearly metaphorical, yet most scholars are willing to grant that this metaphor in particular *expands* our understanding of ancient Israelite perceptions of what a covenant meant. Since scholars don't use metaphor as an excuse to dismiss Hosea 2, neither should they dismiss Jeremiah 11:20. To label Jeremiah 11:20 and similar passages as metaphor could well be justified. But this does not mean that these passages contribute nothing to our understanding of ancient Israelite sacrifice. If rituals (including sacrifice) meaning anything at all, they involve metaphors, practically by definition.⁶³ Why dismiss one set of metaphors from the discussion of another? Considering that a fair amount of evidence can be marshaled in defense of the argument that the notion of *imitatio Dei* informed ancient Israelite approaches to sacrifice, the prophetic images which depict God in sacrificial terms ought to be looked at very seriously. These may well be root metaphors that contribute to our understanding of what sacrifice meant to the ancient Israelites.

Returning to the sacrificial process, and the aspects of it which can be understood in light of *imitatio Dei*, once the animal is dissected, various parts of it are consumed in one way or another. While the blood of the animal is daubed on parts of the altar or sanctuary, the fat, meat, and organs of the animal are either consumed in the flames of the altar or eaten by the priests. These aspects of sacrifice, too, may well be understood in light of *imitatio Dei*. We have already mentioned how frequently God appears on the scene in sacrificial narratives as a “consuming

⁶¹Ibid., 246.

⁶²Generally, see Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances*, 23–24 and Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 147–55. On biblical metaphors in particular, see Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 122–26.

⁶³On metaphor and ritual generally, see Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances*, 23–24 and 41–50; and Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 233–35. With regard to the Hebrew Bible specifically, see Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 119, 122–26. Some prefer to understand rituals as metonymic rather than metaphorical. On the distinction between metaphor and metonymy, see Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 35–40. For a theory of sacrifice as metonymic, see Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) 222–28.

fire” (e.g., Exod 24:17).⁶⁴ By eating and burning elements of sacrificial offerings, the offerers of sacrifice in ancient Israel are imitating activities often ascribed to God in narratives in which God’s presence during a sacrifice is explicitly described.

Briefly stated, the typical ancient Israelite sacrificial process involves the performance by Israelite laypeople and their priests of a number of activities which can be well understood in light of the concern to imitate God.⁶⁵ The process of ritual purification may well involve the separation of people from those aspects of humanity (death and sex) which are least God-like. The selection, killing, dissection, and consumption of sacrificial animals also have analogues in the divine realm. God, too, selects, kills, looks inside things, and appears on earth as a consuming fire. Sacrifice, then, ought to be understood *metaphorically*—and I use the term advisedly. An analogy lies at the heart of sacrifice.⁶⁶ The offerer and priest play the part of God, and the domesticated animals from the herd and the flock play the part of the people (and particularly Israel).⁶⁷ This analogy can be fully appreciated only when both halves receive equal consideration: as God is to people, so too, during the process of sacrifice, are the people of Israel to the sacrificial animals. Indeed, one advantage of understanding sacrifice metaphorically is that we are encouraged to think of the roles played by both the people and the animals. Theories of sacrifice that identify the (usually innocent) animal with the (usually guilty) offerer without identifying the offerer with something or someone else—as analogy would require—can only hope to explain half of sacrifice at most. Another value of the approach suggested here is that we can understand the aspects of sacrificial ritual discussed above without recourse to scapegoating, substitution, or even expiation. Indeed, the daily burnt offering in particular can well be understood as morally neutral—there are not necessarily innocent victims here any more than there are guilty priests.

■ Attracting and Maintaining the Divine Presence

The organizing principle of *imitatio Dei*, though helpful, does not exhaustively explain sacrifice in ancient Israel. The principle provides, I believe, an overall rationale

⁶⁴See also Lev 9:24, 10:2; Num 9:15; 1 Kgs 18:38; cf. Gen 15:17.

⁶⁵Of course, Israelites will perform these activities less frequently and with less intensity than their priests.

⁶⁶Similar analogies may well be involved in other ritual structures that can be understood in light of *imitatio Dei*: e.g., Israelites resting on the recurring seventh day of the week as God rested on the eternal seventh day of creation; Israelites constructing a temple on earth as God constructed the earth itself. *Imitatio Dei* has its limits; people cannot fully identify with God. They can merely aspire to briefly play on the human level roles played by God on the divine level.

⁶⁷On animals as metaphors for Israel, see Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 115–40.

for understanding ritual purification as a preparation for the sacrificial act. Moreover, the principle provides a fuller understanding of these important aspects of the sacrificial process: the selection, killing, dissection, and consumption of an animal. Yet *imitatio Dei* does not, for instance, fully explain the purposes or functions of the sacrificial act: what is achieved by this act of imitation? Nor does it fully explain other important matters, such as the determination of which domesticated animal species are fit for sacrificial offering, or the choice of which parts of the animal are placed on the altar and which are given to the priests. It also cannot answer other important questions concerning agricultural offerings on the one hand, and blood symbolism on the other.⁶⁸ I doubt that any single theory or principle will ever explain all of this.⁶⁹

The *function* of the sacrificial act can, I believe, be better understood when we bring to the discussion our second organizing principle: the priestly traditions' overriding concern with the divine presence dwelling in the midst of Israel.⁷⁰ That the priestly strands of the Pentateuch are concerned with the presence of God in the community of Israel need hardly be stated. Practically from the first ritual legislation of the priestly strand (Exod 20:24) through the end of Leviticus (26:11–12), we find this concern with the presence of God. It is articulated in the command to build the sanctuary: "Make them build me a sanctuary and I will dwell among them" (Exod 25:8). Upon the construction of the tabernacle, we are told that "the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle" (Exod 40:35; cf. 1 Kgs 8:10–11). Of course, the term "tabernacle" (מִשְׁכָּן), with its connotation of indwelling, itself testifies to the importance of this concern.⁷¹ Moreover, the priestly traditions' favorite term for the sacrificial act, "offering" (קָרָבַן), with its connotation of closeness and nearness, likely expresses the same concern.⁷² And we also ought to recall that our most detailed sacrificial rules—along with the rest of the book of Leviticus—are said to have been spoken to Moses by God, *from the Tent of Meeting* (Lev 1:1).

⁶⁸On blood symbolism, see Hendel, "Sacrifice as a Cultural System," and Stephen A. Geller, "Blood Cult: An Interpretation of the Priestly Work of the Pentateuch," *Prooftexts* 12 (1992) 99–124; reprinted in *Sacred Enigmas: Literary Religion in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Routledge, 1996) 62–86.

⁶⁹Cf. Anderson, "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT)," 872: "sacrifice as a *multivalent entity* . . ."

⁷⁰For discussions concerning the divine presence in ancient Israel, see Kaufmann, *Toledot ha-Emunah*, 5. 473–76; Levine, "On The Presence of God in Biblical Religion," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968) 71–87; and Wenham, *Leviticus*, 16–18. See also Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *Divine Presence and Community: A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus* (International Theological Commentary, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997) 10–17, 20.

⁷¹On the term "tabernacle," see Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 298–300.

⁷²On this term, see Everett Fox, *The Schocken Bible, Volume 1: The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995) 497; Levine, "On the Presence," 80; and Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 145.

How does the concern with the divine presence help us understand the ritual killing of animals? A number of years ago, Baruch Levine suggested understanding sacrifices, particularly the burnt offerings, as an effort to attract the deity.⁷³ This dynamic is borne out by a host of biblical narratives that describe God's presence—usually appearing as a consuming fire—coming to the scene after some sacrificial rite has been properly performed. Such narratives include the covenant-ratification ceremony at Sinai (Exod 24:17); the ceremony of Aaron's investiture (Lev 9:22–4); the sacrifice offered by Samson's parents (Judg 13:19–21); the sacrifices David offered at Ornan's threshing floor (1 Chr 21:26; but cf. 2 Sam 24:25); and, perhaps most dramatically, the narrative of Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal (1 Kgs 18:38).⁷⁴ According to Gary Anderson, this same dynamic is operative in the prophetic literature of the postexilic period, in which the message is: rebuild the temple, seek to bring back the presence of God, then things will improve.⁷⁵

Other sources from the ancient Near East also reflect the notion that sacrifice functions as an invitation or as a means of attracting the divine presence. Perhaps this is most notable in the oft-quoted passage from the eleventh tablet of the standard Babylonian (Ninevite) version of the Epic of Gilgamesh:⁷⁶

(155) I let out to the four winds and I offered a sacrifice. (156) I made an offering at the mountain top. (157) I set up cult vessels by sevens. (158) Under them I poured reed, cedar and myrtle. (159) The gods smelled (its) sweet savor. (161) The gods, like flies, around the offerer gathered.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of the same dynamic in a biblical ritual text can be seen in Exodus 29, where the sacrifice to be offered twice daily is referred to as a "pleasing odor to God" (29:41). What is more, the performance of this regular daily sacrifice is explicitly connected to the notion of the perpetual maintenance of the presence of God within the sanctuary (29:42–46):⁷⁷

⁴²It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. ⁴³I will meet with the Israelites there, and it

⁷³See *In the Presence*, 22–27 and "On the Presence," 79–80; cf. Anderson, "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT)," 878.

⁷⁴Cf. also Abraham's covenant of pieces (Gen 15:17), which may or may not technically be a sacrifice.

⁷⁵Anderson, *Sacrifices and Offerings*, 91–126.

⁷⁶Cf. ANET 95. Translation above is by Anderson, taken from his discussion in *Sacrifices and Offerings*, 14–19. Anderson builds on Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) 227–29, 296.

⁷⁷Biblical passages here and below are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), with some modifications.

shall be sanctified by my glory. . . . ⁴⁵I will dwell among the Israelites and I will be their God. ⁴⁶And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God.

The daily offering not only attracts the divine presence, but the proper performance of the offering also maintains that presence within the community.⁷⁸

This overriding concern with the attraction and maintenance of the divine presence can also be understood as a common denominator of many of the older, well-known “theories” (or metaphors) of sacrifice. For instance, the bestowal of gifts and the provision of food can be viewed as aspects of more general concerns with attraction and maintenance. Similarly, features of sacrifice sometimes explained in light of “communion” (e.g., the sharing of sacrificial meat) or “blood ties” (e.g., the daubing of blood upon both persons and the altar) might be understood as attempts to establish a sense of connection between the people and the deity, whose presence the people hope to attract and maintain among them for perpetuity.

There is a further benefit in elevating the concern for the attraction and maintenance of the divine presence to the level of an organizing principle. Like the notion of *imitatio Dei*, the concern with the attraction and maintenance of the divine presence allows us to draw further connections between the interrelated structures of purity and sacrifice. The notion of *imitatio Dei*, as we have shown, enabled us to see that the ritual structure of sacrifice is intimately connected to the structure known as *ritual* purity. Our second organizing principle becomes most helpful, however, when we bring into the discussion our second conception of defilement. This concern to attract and maintain the divine presence enables us to see the deep connection between the structure of sacrifice on the one hand and the structure of *moral* defilement on the other.

The notion of “moral” defilement, as we and others have described it elsewhere,⁷⁹ concerns the idea that certain grave sins are so heinous that they defile. These acts—often referred to as “abominations” (תועבות)—include idolatry (e.g., Lev 19:31, 20:1–3), sexual sins (e.g., Lev 18:24–30), and bloodshed (e.g., Num

⁷⁸For a different view on sacrifice as a means of maintenance, see Gorman, *Divine Presence*, 7–8 and *The Ideology of Ritual*, 54–55, 220–21. Gorman categorizes the daily burnt offering as a “ritual of maintenance” (his two other categories are rituals of “founding” and “restoration”). Though his conclusions are somewhat commensurate with the analysis suggested here, Gorman focuses his attention more on the functions of sacrifice and less on its possible symbolic values.

⁷⁹On this distinction, see Klawans, “The Impurity of Immorality,” 1–6 and *Impurity and Sin* esp. 21–32; cf. Frymer-Kensky, “Pollution.”

35:33–34).⁸⁰ They *morally*, but not *ritually*, defile the sinner (Lev 18:24), the land of Israel (Lev 18:25; Ezek 36:17), and the sanctuary of God (Lev 20:3; Ezek 5:11). This notion of moral defilement, perhaps most clearly articulated in Leviticus 18:24–30, in turn leads to the expulsion of the people from the land of Israel (Lev 18:28; Ezek 36:19). Other passages add yet another concern to this notion. The problem with these three sins—idolatry, sexual transgression, and murder—and the reason that they bring about exile, is that God so abhors them that God cannot and will not abide in a land saturated with the residue left by their performance. This concern is very clearly articulated toward the end of the book of Numbers (35:30–34):

³⁰If anyone kills another, the murderer shall be put to death. . . .

³¹Moreover you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer who is subject to the death penalty; a murderer must be put to death.

³³You shall not pollute (לֹא תִחַנְיֵפוּ) the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it.

³⁴You shall not defile (לֹא תטמא) the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the Israelites.

The thrust of the passage is this: murder defiles the land, and this phenomenon poses a threat to the maintenance of the presence of God in the midst of Israel. In a sense, we could say that murderers themselves become abominations (תועבות). Indeed, it is precisely this ramification of Israel’s performance of grave sin that Ezekiel (8–11) depicts quite dramatically. As Israel continues to perform grave sins—again, primarily idolatry, sexual transgression, and murder—the divine presence (called in Ezekiel, the “glory” [כבוד]) departs from the sanctuary.

We can now, perhaps, see even more clearly the differences between ritual and moral defilements. Ritual defilement concerns those things which threaten the status of the defiled individuals vis-à-vis the sacred. Those who are ritually defiled, those whom they ritually defile, and those animals which, when dead, are considered ritually defiling, are banned from the sanctuary. And if that ban is violated, the presumption is that the danger which ensues falls upon those who transgressed the boundary: “Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their impurities, so that they do not die in their impurity by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst” (Lev 15:31).⁸¹ The moral defilements, however, work very differently. They threaten not only the status of the individuals in question, but also the very fabric of Israelite society. Unlike the ritual impurities, the moral impurities

⁸⁰See also 1 Kgs 14:24 (sexual sins); Jer 2:7, 23 (idolatry); Jer 3:1 (sexual sins); Ezek 20:30–31 (idolatry); 33:25–26 (sexual sins and bloodshed); Hos 5:3, 6:10 (general unfaithfulness); and also Ps 106:35–40 (idolatry and bloodshed); cf. Amos 2:7 (sexual immorality as a profanation of God’s name).

⁸¹See also Exod 19:12, 22, 28:43, 30:20; Lev 10:9; but cf. Lev 21:23.

bring with them not only the danger that sacred precincts might be violated, but the threat that God will depart from the sacred precincts altogether. As already emphasized, the moral impurities, unlike the ritual impurities, are referred to as abominations. These things are repugnant to God; they are repulsive, repellent. Here we see how the moral defilements are related to sacrifice. Abominable acts undo what properly performed sacrifice does. Sacrifice attracts and maintains the divine presence; moral defilement repels the divine presence.

The idea that sacrifice and sin are related in some way has long been recognized and emphasized. Indeed, many discussions of sacrifice are dominated by concerns with guilt, scapegoating, and expiation. It certainly cannot be denied that a number of sacrificial rituals described in Leviticus are in some way expiatory (Lev 1:4; Lev 4; Lev 16). But the typical understanding of the relationship between daily sacrifice and grave sin is, I believe, backwards. It is not that the daily sacrifice undoes the damage done by a grave transgression. Quite the contrary—a grave transgression undoes what the daily sacrifice accomplishes. And the difference between the two formulations *is* important. At issue is whether sacrifice is considered, in and of itself, a productive act. Those who argue that expiation is at the core of all or most sacrificial rituals ultimately view sacrifice not as something productive, but as a correction or a reversal of something else that was wrong. One well-known and useful commentary uses the following sequence of verbs in discussing sacrifice: “restore,” “correct,” “undo,” “reverse,” and “cleanse.”⁸² Such terminology is typical of a host of scholars in biblical studies who view sacrifice as primarily a response to transgression.⁸³ Other scholars, however, such as George Buchanan Gray, Yehezkel Kaufmann, Baruch Levine, and most recently Gary Anderson, each in their own way emphasize the joyful and productive nature of much of Israelite sacrifice.⁸⁴ This kind of approach provides a better foundation for understanding the biblical descriptions of the daily burnt offerings (Exod 29:38–45; Num 28:3–8), which are completely devoid of any concern with expiation. The purpose of the daily burnt offering—and perhaps some other sacrifices as well—is to provide constant pleasing odors for the Lord, so that the divine presence will continually remain in the sanctuary.⁸⁵

⁸²Wenham, *Leviticus*, 25–29.

⁸³See, e.g., Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 134–36; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 153–54, 172–77; and Wenham, *Leviticus*, 25–29, 59–63.

⁸⁴See Anderson, *Sacrifices and Offerings*, 91–126; Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament*, esp. 1–54; Kaufmann, *Toledot ha-Emunah*, 2. 560–74; Levine, *In the Presence*, 22–27; and “On the Presence,” 79–80.

⁸⁵There is another form of ritual killing that, at least in a way, does serve more directly to undo the effects of moral impurity: capital punishment. On capital punishment as an antidote to moral defilement, see e.g., Gen 9:4–7 and Num 35:30–34; for a later tradition, see Jub. 7:33. That sacrifice and capital punishment overlap conceptually can be seen in shared terminology

■ Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to present some *preliminary reflections* on the dynamic between the varied and complex sets of symbolic ritual structures that we refer to as purity and sacrifice. We have suggested that ancient Israelite sacrifice and its relation to ritual and moral purity can be more fully understood if we keep in mind two overriding concerns of the priestly traditions: the desire to imitate God and the concern to attract and maintain the presence of God. We suggested that ritual purification involves a process of separating oneself from the least God-like aspects of humanity, in preparation for the performance of a number of sacrificial actions (selecting, killing, dissecting, and consuming) that are much more God-like. The function of this imitation of God is, at least in part, to send up pleasing odors that will attract and maintain the presence of God in the sanctuary, in the midst of Israel. Animal sacrifice, however, has its nemesis; the grave sins which are viewed as morally defiling (idolatry, sexual transgression, and murder) can undo the good that sacrifice does. While properly performed sacrifice attracts and maintains the divine presence, the grave sins which produce moral defilement can repel the divine presence.

In summary, we have seen that these two varied and complex sets of ritual structures—sacrifice and defilement—are intricately interrelated. When we examine these structures in light of the concerns of *imitatio Dei* and efforts to attract and maintain the divine presence, we can identify a number of important connections between ritual and moral impurity on the one hand and sacrifice, on the other. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of these two sets of systems reveals an unsound disparity that remains too entrenched in the scholarly and popular mind alike. While ancient Israelite purity rules are widely recognized to be symbolic, ancient Israelite sacrificial rules are widely dismissed as vestigial and therefore meaningless. When we examine sacrificial and defilement systems at the same time, we cannot help but conclude that ancient Israelite sacrificial rituals may be just as much a symbolic system as the purity rules are commonly believed to be. Moreover, keeping all of these concerns in mind may well help move us toward understanding sacrifice not only as a meaningful and symbolic act, but as a productive act as well.⁸⁶

(e.g., compare “laying hands” in Lev 1:4 and Lev 24:14) and in parallel rules (e.g., compare Deut 21:22 and Lev 22:30; cf. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage*, 123). Compare also the above-noted conceptual overlap between sacrifice and holy war. But capital punishment cannot properly be understood as a sacrifice per se, for there is no selection, no altar, no dissection, no daubing of blood, and no consumption (except in the case of burning).

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