

PSA Examined**Article Series:****Article #7****Do the Levitical
Sacrifices****Support PSA?**

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In [a previous article](#) in this series on Penal Substitutionary

Atonement (PSA), we looked at sin offerings and the Day of Atonement. Since writing that article, I™ve learned a lot more. Thankfully, nothing in the original article was actually wrong, but there is more to it. A lot more. (You can start at the [PSA series intro](#) here if you want.)

This article is about more than just the sin offerings though because a broader picture of the Levitical system makes a lot of things make sense in a way you might not expect.

It turns out that most of the strange things in the Levitical system actually do make a lot of sense if you understand the underlying assumptions. Thankfully, these assumptions are clearly stated in scripture, and will weigh in rather decisively on whether PSA is true or not.

Here we go.

The contaminating properties of sin

In the following passages, notice what sin does to the land. Not just the people, but to the land.

Ezekiel 36:17

â€œSon of man, **when the house of Israel was living in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds**; their way before Me was like the uncleanness of a woman in her impurity.

Notice, not just the people, but the land itself was defiled by the peopleâ€™s sin. This is stated clearly in many other places, and here are just a few of them:

Isaiah 24:5

The earth is also **polluted** by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant.

And again:

Jeremiah 16:18

â€œI will first doubly repay **their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted My land**; they have filled My inheritance with the carcasses of their detestable idols and with their abominations.â€

One more to drive the point home. (*Though I could go on for some time.*)

Jeremiah 2:7

7 â€œI brought you into the fruitful land
To eat its fruit and its good things.
But you came and defiled My land,
And My inheritance you made an abomination.

And hereâ€™s a longer passage showing that sin defiles *both* the sinner *and* the land, and also that God is quite concerned about the defilement of the land. Contextually, this comes after a list of serious sins, many of which were serious enough to warrant the death penalty. (*Like child sacrifices to Molech, bestiality, adultery, etc.*)

Leviticus 18:24-30

24 â€œDo not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these **the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled.** **25** â€œFor **the land has become defiled, therefore I have brought its punishment upon it**, so the land has spewed out its inhabitants. **26** â€œBut as for you, you are to keep My statutes and My judgments and shall not do any of these abominations, *neither* the native, nor the alien who sojourns among you **27** (for **the men of the land** who have been before you have done all these abominations, **and the land has become defiled**); **28** so that **the land** will not spew you out, should **you defile it**, as it has spewed out the nation which has been before you. **29** â€œFor whoever does any of these abominations, those persons who do so shall be cut off from among their

people. **30** “Thus you are to keep My charge, that you **do not practice any of the abominable customs which have been practiced before you, so as not to defile yourselves with them**; I am the LORD your God.”

Notice the dual focus.

We often focus on how sin defiles the sinner “ and rightly so because it does “ but did you notice what else becomes defiled? **The land. The Land becomes defiled when the people in it sin.**

And there are many more verses which say this, though I won’t copy/paste any more for two reasons. First, space. Second and more importantly, it’s scripture; a single clear verse is enough to establish something as true.

This idea that sin can pollute not only the sinner, *but also the land* is entirely foreign to the modern Western mind. We simply don’t think that way and somehow completely miss the verses that explicitly state it. I’ve missed these verses even though I know I’ve read them many times before. I just had the wrong set of “lenses” on and so missed things that shouldn’t be missed.

The fact that sin pollutes the land is important for understanding large portions of the Levitical sacrificial system.

Equally as important is understanding that the people’s sin “ seemingly regardless of where that sin was committed “ also defiled God’s sanctuary; i.e., the Tabernacle. As it is written:

Leviticus 20:1-3

1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **2** “You shall also say to the sons of Israel: “**Any man from the sons of Israel or from the aliens sojourning in Israel** who gives any of his offspring to Molech, shall surely be put to death; the people of the land shall stone him with stones. **3** “I will also set My face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because **he has given some of his offspring to Molech, so as to defile My sanctuary and to profane My holy name.**

This same idea is echoed in other places as well, which we’ll omit for space’s sake. **Notice that sacrificing to Molech didn’t have to happen in the sanctuary for it to defile the sanctuary.** We know this because aliens who sojourned in the land weren’t allowed into the sanctuary, yet it would still defile the sanctuary if they sacrificed to Molech. Thus, simple logic tells us that sacrificing to Molech outside the sanctuary also defiled the sanctuary.

Thus, serious sin in the land of Israel defiled God's sanctuary even if the sin was committed outside of the sanctuary.

However, that wasn't the only thing that did. The context for this next verse is about the regulations for when someone touches a corpse, and later on, it talks about when a man dies in his tent.

Numbers 19:13

13 Anyone who touches a corpse, the body of a man who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from Israel. Because the water for impurity was not sprinkled on him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is still on him.

(Note: "cut off from Israel" here is almost certainly exile, not death.)

It wasn't a sin to touch a dead body. However, it did make you unclean and not purifying yourself from that particular uncleanness was an extremely serious affair. And keep in mind that this verse says "anyone", so it's primarily talking about common people, not priests. *(though it would obviously apply to priests as well.)*

Death, or even touching a dead person without ritual cleansing of the death, defiled God's sanctuary even if the unclean person didn't enter the sanctuary/Tabernacle. You'll see soon that this was because God wanted Himself associated with life, not death. *(Proof of that later.)*

Let the thought that sin defiled the land and sanctuary/Tabernacle sink into your mind while we switch gears for a minute.

(Or at least certain serious sins could defile the sanctuary directly.)

Now, not all of the Levitical sacrifices were about sin.

Some were, but the rest weren't. Yes, I know that might sound odd to many Christians, but it's true and explicitly stated in the Old Testament. We'll look at that now because it'll help us to decide if PSA fits into the picture.

Burnt Offerings

The first place that a burnt offering is done in the Bible is just after the flood, after Noah and his family left the ark. Yes, that means that burnt offerings predate the Mosaic Law

Genesis 8:18-22

18 So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. **19** Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by their families from the ark.

20 Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. **21** The LORD smelled the soothing aroma; and the LORD said to Himself, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done.

22 "While the earth remains,
Seedtime and harvest,
And cold and heat,
And summer and winter,
And day and night
Shall not cease."

Please keep that in mind for a moment. Now, the Hebrew word translated "burnt offering" is "עֹלָה" (olah), and it means:

Definition: Burnt offering

Meaning: a step, a holocaust

Word Origin: Derived from the root "עָלָה" (alah), meaning "to ascend" or "to go up."

Corresponding Greek / Hebrew Entries: "G3646: ὁλοκαυτωμα (holokautoma) meaning "whole burnt offering."

Usage: The term "olah" refers to a specific type of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, known as the burnt offering. This offering was entirely consumed by fire on the altar, symbolizing complete dedication and surrender to God. The olah was a voluntary act of worship, atonement, and devotion, often associated with seeking favor or expressing gratitude to God.

Cultural and Historical Background: In ancient Israelite worship, the burnt offering was a central element of the sacrificial system established by God through Moses. It was performed daily, both morning and evening, and on special occasions such as Sabbaths, new moons, and festivals. The offering typically involved a male animal without blemish, such as a bull, ram, or bird, depending on the offerer's means. The complete consumption of the offering by fire symbolized the offerer's total commitment to God and the desire for purification and reconciliation.

You could almost understand it as a "dedication offering", because it symbolized dedication to God. That's likely why God considered it a "soothing aroma" because it symbolized complete dedication to Him. As you'll soon see, burnt offerings were often required when a man repented of a sin. Again, this is likely because the burnt offering was a re-dedication to God after the

sin, symbolizing the repentant man's complete devotion to God after the sin.

There's a lot more to say about the burnt offering, but it's outside the scope of this series and doesn't touch on PSA, so we won't go into it. For now, we'll move on to another offering that's also not about sin and functions similarly to the burnt offering.

The grain offering

The procedures for the grain offering are explained in detail in Leviticus chapter 2. However, for this overview, it's Leviticus chapter 6 that tells us the reason it was offered:

Leviticus 6:14-18

14 Now this is the law of the grain offering: the sons of Aaron shall present it before the LORD in front of the altar. **15** Then one of them shall lift up from it a handful of the fine flour of the grain offering, with its oil and all the incense that is on the grain offering, and he shall offer it up in smoke on the altar, a soothing aroma, as its memorial offering to the LORD. **16** What is left of it Aaron and his sons are to eat. It shall be eaten as unleavened cakes in a holy place; they are to eat it in the court of the tent of meeting. **17** It shall not be baked with leaven. I have given it as their share from My offerings by fire; it is most holy, like the sin offering and the guilt offering. **18** Every male among the sons of Aaron may eat it; it is a permanent ordinance throughout your generations, from the offerings by fire to the LORD. Whoever touches them will become consecrated.

(Note: That last phrase of "will become consecrated" doesn't mean that the person became a priest. Rather, it meant ceremonial holiness.)

Notice the "why" clause in verse 15, about how it will be a memorial offering to the Lord. The word translated "Memorial" is *azkarah*, and it means:

Definition: Memorial offering, remembrance portion

Meaning: a reminder, remembrance-offering

Word Origin: Derived from the root *zak* (zakar), meaning "to remember" or "to mention."

Corresponding Greek / Hebrew Entries: While there is no direct Greek equivalent for *azkarah*, the concept of memorial offerings can be related to the Greek term *mnemosynon*, which also signifies remembrance or memorial.

Usage: The term *azkarah* refers to a portion of a grain offering that is burned on the altar as a memorial to God. It is a symbolic act of remembrance, signifying the worshiper's dedication and acknowledgment of God's provision and sovereignty. The *azkarah* is a fragrant offering, representing the worshiper's prayers and devotion ascending to God.

The burnt offering symbolizes complete dedication to God, and the grain offering signifies remembering that dedication. It also seems to serve as a “thank you” for God’s provision and a recognition of His sovereignty.

The Peace Offering

Now, to properly explain what was happening, we need to look at what was not happening. To that end, Psalm 50 will help us out:

Psalm 50:7-15

7 “Hear, O My people, and I will speak;
O Israel, I will testify against you;
I am God, your God.

8 “I do not reprove you for your sacrifices,
And your burnt offerings are continually before Me.

9 “I shall take no young bull out of your house
Nor male goats out of your folds.

10 “For every beast of the forest is Mine,
The cattle on a thousand hills.

11 “I know every bird of the mountains,
And everything that moves in the field is Mine.

12 “If I were hungry I would not tell you,
For the world is Mine, and all it contains.

13 “Shall I eat the flesh of bulls
Or drink the blood of male goats?

14 “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving
And pay your vows to the Most High;

15 Call upon Me in the day of trouble;
I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me.”

Please keep that in mind because I’ll reference it soon. Now, to the peace offering:

Leviticus 3:1

1 “Now if his offering is a sacrifice of peace offerings, if he is going to offer out of the herd, whether male or female, he shall offer it without defect before the LORD.

Now, the Hebrew word that's translated "peace offering" is [שְׁלֵמִים](#) ([shelem](#)), and here's a quote from Thayer's lexicon:

87 noun [masculine] **sacrifice for alliance or friendship**, "peace-offering" (explanation disputed: **originally sacrifice for alliance** Di; al. **peace-offering (mark of peace with God)**, **áµ5Sm. Kings Proverbs 14:1-15:1**, De StaG i. 496 WeHeid. 71 (**fellowship between God and worshippers**); **welfare-offering**, **áµ5 elsewhere 1f1%ö, 1@j11¿ 1½, Ke; thank-offering (as due rendered for benefit, or in paying vow, compare v Pi`el 4, and Proverbs 7:14) Ges Ew Kn; sacred meal its special feature: see RSSemitic i. 219; 2nd ed. 237**

Let me quote a small portion of that again so it isn't missed:

peace-offering (mark of peace with God)

That's important.

Notice that this isn't an offering to create peace, it's an offering for when there's already peace.

Again, that's important.

A few translations render it "fellowship offering" for this reason, and here's another lexicon quote on that:

Usage: The term "shelem" refers to a type of sacrifice in the Old Testament, commonly known as a peace offering or **fellowship offering**. It was a voluntary sacrifice made by the Israelites **to express gratitude, fulfill a vow, or seek peace and fellowship with God. The offering symbolized reconciliation and communion with God**, as well as harmony within the community.

Cultural and Historical Background: In ancient Israelite worship, the peace offering was one of the key sacrifices outlined in the Levitical law. It was distinct from other offerings like the burnt offering or sin offering. **The peace offering was unique in that it was shared among the offerer, the priests, and God. A portion of the sacrifice was burned on the altar, a portion was given to the priests, and the remaining part was consumed by the offerer and their family in a communal meal. This practice emphasized the communal and relational aspects of worship, highlighting the importance of fellowship with God and others.**

Notice that the peace/fellowship offering was intended to be a (symbolic) communal meal. This might seem strange since God is in heaven and obviously doesn't need food, however, a few verses later scripture tells us that this was exactly the intent.

Leviticus 3:9-11

9 From the sacrifice of peace offerings he shall bring as an offering by fire to the LORD, its fat, the entire fat tail which he shall remove close to the backbone, and the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails, 10 and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, which is on the loins, and the lobe of the liver, which he shall remove with the kidneys. 11 Then the priest shall offer it up in smoke on the altar as food, an offering by fire to the LORD.

The idea is that you're offering the best parts of the animal to God as "food". That's why we started with Psalm 50, because no one should get the impression that mere mortals can "feed" God. Obviously we can't. That would be exactly as absurd as Psalm 50 makes it out to be.

It's a picture.

Or maybe a metaphor.

Perhaps a "symbolic meal" would be closest.

God is in heaven, and the Hebrew word for "heaven" also means "sky". (It's "shamayim" if you want to look it up.) The burnt parts of the sacrifice went up into the heavens/sky (again, same word) where they believed God was. The other parts were shared between the person who brought the peace/fellowship offering and the priest. Thus, it was something akin to a symbolic "community meal" with God.

God wanted to have fellowship with Israel, He wanted to be present with Israel, and He wanted to (at least symbolically/metaphorically) share a meal with Israel. That's what the peace/fellowship offering was about.

To draw a terrible analogy, the peace/fellowship offering is something like a backyard cookout.

God provided for Israel, Israel brought the food that God had provided for the "meal", and the priests did the actual "cooking" in God's "backyard" on the "grill" (the court of the Tabernacle and altar respectively). Obviously this metaphor breaks down extremely quickly so please don't take it too seriously. However, the basic idea of sharing a meal is the point of the peace/fellowship offering.

(Communion is similar in the New Testament. That's a rabbit trail that we won't explore in this article, but I wanted to mention it.)

Anyway!

God wanted to symbolically "eat a meal" with Israel, but there was a problem: Israel kept "polluting the kitchen" with their sin.

Remember how we talked about sin polluting the land, the Tabernacle/sanctuary, and its people? That's why we talked about that first. We'll talk more about it in a moment, so keep it in mind.

God's presence in the Tabernacle

This idea of God wanting to (*symbolically*) share a meal with Israel is just one way the He wanted to be close to them. The Tabernacle was actually all about God dwelling with His people.

Exodus 25:8-9

8 Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, **that I may dwell among them.** **9** According to all that I am going to show you, as **the pattern of the tabernacle** and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct *it*.

After Moses and the craftsmen had finished all the work building the Tabernacle and all its various elements, and after they had finished consecrating everything, we get this:

Exodus 40:33-35

33 He erected the court all around the tabernacle and the altar, and hung up the veil for the gateway of the court. **Thus Moses finished the work.** **34** Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and **the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.** **35** Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and **the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.**

The idea was that God was going to live among His people. He even goes so far as to call the Tabernacle His "house". The following verse is before any of the temples were built, so this is indeed talking about the Tabernacle.

1 Samuel 1:7

7 It happened year after year, as often as she went up to **the house of the LORD**, she would provoke her; so she wept and would not eat.

Now, obviously God is omnipresent and a Spirit so it's not like God actually "lived" there. However, He clearly made His presence known at the Tabernacle in a special way. Further, the Tabernacle and its furniture were designed to reinforce this idea. The late, great Dr. Michael Heiser had this to say in his podcast series on Leviticus:

The Bread of the Presence was bread that was continually placed on the gold table inside the Holy Place every Sabbath, and there was a continually burning light in the Holy Place according to Exodus 25-27. The incense is always to be burned. **That was all to create the impression that God was home. The divine presence was always present inside the Holy Place as though God was physically living there, but people knew that he really wasn't physically in there.**

!

Nevertheless, there were these trappings associated with the tabernacle **to convey the idea that the presence of God was there in the camp**. Israel didn't need embodiment to understand that, but **they did need some sort of visual way to communicate that idea**. So when they present offerings, they are gifts spoken of as food offerings and such, but the Israelites knew very well that they didn't have an embodied deity in there munching on the sacrifice. We shouldn't overly literalize this.

Source: Kindle version of Dr. Michael Heiser's podcast series on Leviticus, page 25-26, 7%

The Israelites lived in tents, so God came down and "lived" in a tent with them (*the Tabernacle*). Israelite tents would have bread and a light in them, so God's tent (*the Tabernacle*) had bread and light in it.

Again, this is all symbolic.

God was driving the point home that He really did dwell with His people. However, as we saw before, the people had a real problem with polluting "God's tent" because their sins polluted the land and sanctuary/Tabernacle. Like the rest of us, God wanted to live in a clean house, and Israel's sins sometimes made that hard.

So, God provided a solution.

Solving the problem of sin's pollution

But before we talk about that solution, we need to look at what would happen if Israel didn't use that solution. Afterward, we'll look at the two relevant sacrifices.

God might "remove out" if the pollution/defilement was bad enough

The heading pretty much explains it, and this is pretty clear from a couple of passages in scripture.

Ezekiel 5:11

11 "So as I live," declares the Lord GOD, "surely, **because you have defiled My sanctuary with all your detestable idols and with all your abominations, therefore I will also withdraw**, and My eye will have no pity and I will not spare.

Ezekiel 8:6

6 And He said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing, **the great abominations which the house of Israel are committing here, so that I would be far from My sanctuary?** But yet you will see still greater abominations.”

Other passages allude to this, but they aren’t as concise. The point remains that Israel was aware that if they let things get bad enough, God might leave. Thus, that was an incentive to use the solution that God provided.

The solution to the pollution of sin

(EDIT: we will be using the standard PSA definition of “atonement” for this article until we get to the heading “The homonym problem” and “atonement”. The Hebrew word we translate “Atonement” has another meaning that’s usually missed, and we’ll cover it under that heading. However, we will completely ignore it until then.)

We’ve actually already covered the answer to this in a previous article, and also how God decreed that Israel should cleanse things of pollution: The Day of Atonement. Since we’ve already looked at it in detail, I’ll only quote the relevant portion. Afterward we’ll look at more individual solutions.

Leviticus 16:15-19

15 “Then he shall slaughter the goat of the **sin offering** which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. 16 “**He shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and thus he shall do for the tent of meeting which abides with them in the midst of their impurities.** 17 “When he goes in to make atonement in the holy place, no one shall be in the tent of meeting until he comes out, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household and for all the assembly of Israel. 18 “Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat and put it on the horns of the altar on all sides. 19 “With his finger **he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it seven times and cleanse it, and from the impurities of the sons of Israel consecrate it.**

We already covered how the Day of Atonement was about cleansing from sin. However, **what we didn’t cover earlier was that it was also about cleansing “sacred space”; i.e. the “tent of meeting/Tabernacle.**

That phrase “sacred space” will be important soon, so please keep it in mind.

We just saw how sins contaminate/pollute the land. The **purpose** of meeting **at** the Tabernacle was on the land which was polluted by the people's sins, and at least some serious sins would contaminate/pollute the Tabernacle directly. Thus, God wanted it cleansed. Thus, He instituted the Day of Atonement to accomplish the cleansing.

Notably, it was cleansed by the blood of a sin offering.

We'll come back to that in a moment. *(And explain why it's the case.)*

Remember: only unintentional sins

The Day of Atonement was only for **the** sins of the people committed in ignorance. That is, for when the people sinned and didn't know that they had sinned. This is stated most clearly and concisely in Hebrews:

Hebrews 9:6-7

6 Now when these things have been so prepared, the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle performing the divine worship, **7** but **into the second, only the high priest enters once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance.**

(Note: the ESV says "unintentional sins", which is not only a wrong translation, it misleads readers and ignores large portions of the sacrificial system.)

Something important to realize: **the Day of Atonement only took care of unintentional sins which were committed without the person's knowledge.**

It did nothing whatsoever for deliberate sins.

Nothing.

Not a single thing.

If you read the Mosaic Law carefully, or simply read the verse above which summarizes it, you'll see that this is the case. **The day of atonement was to cleanse sins that were committed without the knowledge of the sinner, and they never became known to the sinner or the congregation.** There are many places in the Mosaic Law where you see a phrase like "when his sin becomes known to him" and we'll look at those in a moment but once a sin became known you were suppose to cleanse it.

When a sin never became known, that's what the Day of Atonement was about.

The Day of Atonement was a catch all solution to cleanse the pollution of any sins that the people committed that they didn't know about.

For sins that did become known to an Israelite, there was the next type of offering.

The guilt offering

Thereâ€™s a lot of instructions for this one, but this is the summary that gets the point across. Since this article is just an overview, thatâ€™ll suffice.

Leviticus 5:17-19

17 Now if a person sins and does any of the things which the LORD has commanded not to be done, **though he was unaware**, still he is guilty and shall bear his punishment. **18** He is then to bring to the priest a ram without defect from the flock, according to your valuation, for a guilt offering. So the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his error in which he sinned **unintentionally and did not know it**, and it will be forgiven him. **19** It is a guilt offering; he was certainly guilty before the LORD.

Notice that the guilt offering is for unintentional sins where the sinner didnâ€™t realize that what he was doing was wrong. It wasnâ€™t for intentional sins, but only unintentional sins.

Now, almost everyone says that there were no sacrifices for intentional sins, and they are almost right. Not, but close. Thereâ€™s this instruction in Numbers which seems to clearly weigh in:

Numbers 15:27-31

27 Also if one person sins unintentionally, then he shall offer a one year old female goat for a sin offering. **28** The priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who goes astray when he sins unintentionally, making atonement for him that he may be forgiven. **29** You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them. **30** But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. **31** Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt will be on him.

(Note: "cut off from among his people" likely means exiled from the community, though there are other opinions on this.)

Notice the word "defiantly". The Hebrew word there is yad (yad) and it literally means "with a high hand", or intentionally, as the lexicon confirms.

i.e. boldly, **defiantly**; same phrase of presumptuousness (against x^3x) **Numbers 15:30**

This isn't just that you knew it was wrong and you did it anyway. That can happen in a moment of weakness, or perhaps if you feel pressured, or you're being coerced, etc. This is more than that. **This is an intentional and deliberate choice to flout God's law because you simply don't care what He wants.** This doesn't speak to a moment of weakness type sins. This is outright rebellion against God because you simply don't care what He wants.

That was punished by exile from the camp.

(Some say it's death, not exile.)

There were other intentional sins mentioned that weren't high handed rebellion either, like refusing to testify in a trial (*likely because of fear*). You can find a few lists of sins that required a guilt offering in Leviticus 5:1-6, Leviticus 19:20-22, and Leviticus 6:1-7 (*read that last one in the ESV, as it gets the nuance better*).

All these sins that required a guilt offering were either (1) unintentional, or (2) they were a moment of weakness type of sin.

Notably, even the ones that seem intentional, like in Leviticus 6:1-7, aren't high-handed rebellion sins and have a clause like *when he comes to know it* or *when he realizes his guilt*, making it clear that these aren't defiant sins.

Now, here's an important point:

All these sins required a guilt offering, not a sin offering.

That's important.

At the risk of stating the obvious: a guilt offering is not the same as a sin offering. They are different things! sort of.

Most Christians seem to think that when an Israelite committed a sin, he had to offer a sin offering. That makes sense given the names, but it's not true. An Israelite who sinned had to bring a guilt offering, not a sin offering.

There are places where the difference might seem almost non-existent, but once you understand the underlying logic, you'll see that they are different even when they are the same sacrifice. That might sound confusing, but clarity will come.

(Spoiler: you bring a guilt offering when you are guilty of personal sin. Your guilt is why you bring the sacrifice, which is why it's called a guilt offering. But the specific type of offering that you bring because of your guilt could then be a sin offering and/or burnt offering. Guilt is the reason you bring a sacrifice, a sin offering or burnt offering is the specific type of sacrifice you bring because of your guilt.)

Now, you might ask what the sin offering did, since the guilt offering is what you bring when you sin. Well, it goes back to sin polluting the land, which we'll look at now.

The sin offering

Continuing from the last section, here's an important question: **Is it a sin offering or a sin purification/cleansing offering?**

Let me explain.

The Hebrew word that we translate sin is **חַטָּא** (**chatta**), and like most words in most languages, it can mean more than one thing. For example, our word fair can mean light-skinned as in fair-skinned, reasonable as in that's fair, or a portable amusement park as in We're going to the fair, etc.

The primary meaning and use of **חַטָּא** is indeed sin, as the lexicon testifies:

Definition: Sin, sin offering

Meaning: an offence, its penalty, occasion, sacrifice, expiation, an offender

Word Origin: Derived from the root **חָטָה** (chata), meaning to miss or to sin.

And here's one of many, many places that it's used:

Genesis 18:20

20 And the LORD said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin (**chatta**) is exceedingly grave.

The word definitely does mean sin.

There's no doubt about that. It occurs around 300 times in the Old Testament, and here's how it's translated in the KJV:

1. sin (182x)
2. sin offering (116x)
3. punishment (3x)
4. purification for sin (2x)
5. purifying (1x)
6. sinful (1x)
7. sinner (1x)

Did you notice lines 4 and 5? Do they seem odd to you?

If they do, you wouldn't be alone. I'm willing to bet that 95%+ of Christians "maybe 99% or more" would never have guessed that the Hebrew word for sin can also mean purification. However, it can and does mean that.

This is from Thayer's Greek Lexicon, definition #5. (All emphasis except the red is original, and you can double check the definition [here](#).)

5 purification from sins of ceremonial uncleanness, all P: $\alpha\beta\gamma$ Numbers 8:7 water of **purification from sin**; $\delta\epsilon\zeta\eta\theta\iota\kappa\lambda\mu$ Numbers 19:9; $\nu\omega\psi\chi\phi\chi\phi\chi\phi$ Numbers 19:17 ashes of the burning of the **purification from sin** (RV renders *sin-offering*; but there was no offering made, only water of purification was used).

You need to see this to believe it:

Numbers 8:7

7 Thus you shall do to them, for their **cleansing**: sprinkle **purifying (chattaTMah)** water on them, and let them use a razor over their whole body and wash their clothes, and they will be clean.

Yes, that's the word for sin. You can confirm that in an interlinear Bible [here](#) if you like.

The word for "sin" was indeed translated "purifying" here.

And that's not the only verse either.

Numbers 19:9

Now a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place, and the congregation of the sons of Israel shall keep it as water **to remove impurity**; it is **purification from sin (chattaTMah)**.

And:

Numbers 19:17 (NKJV, as the NASB is confusingly worded here)

And for an unclean person they shall take some of the ashes of the heifer burnt **for purification from sin (chattaTMah)**, and running water shall be put on them in a vessel.

The fact that it can also mean purification, and especially mean **purification from sin** is very interesting. Now, consider that fact in the context of the "sin offering".

Really, please do.

What if it's not a "sin offering"? What if it's a "sin purification/cleansing offering" instead?

That is, an offering that purifies/cleanses from sin?

Maybe?

Consider the following passage about the blood of the sin (*purification?*) offering on the Day of Atonement with that context. As we saw earlier, the blood in question is from a sin offering.

Leviticus 16:18-19

18 “Then he shall go out to **the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it**, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat and put it on the horns of the altar on all sides. **19** “With his finger **he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it seven times and cleanse it**, and from the impurities of the sons of Israel consecrate it.

The reason the blood is sprinkled on the altar is to cleanse it. Again, we see that the “sin offering” is tied to cleansing. Further, notice the parallelism. **It seems like the phrase “make atonement” is also tied to cleansing here.**

Thus, this verse does something that is almost always missed when Christians talk about “atonement”: this verse ties “atonement” to cleansing.

That doesn’t mean they are the same thing, but they seem related to each other according to this verse. At the very least, there’s definite parallelism between the two statements and the two concepts go together. Certainly the sin offering was involved with cleansing.

In fact, the sin offering purified whatever touched it.

No joke.

Seriously.

Leviticus 6:24-30

24 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **25** “Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, “**This is the law of the sin offering**: in the place where the burnt offering is slain **the sin offering shall be slain before the LORD; it is most holy**. **26** “The priest who offers it for sin shall eat it. It shall be eaten in a holy place, in the court of the tent of meeting. **27** “**Anyone who touches its flesh will become consecrated**; and when any of its blood splashes on a garment, in a holy place you shall wash what was splashed on. **28** “Also the earthenware vessel in which it was boiled shall be broken; and if it was boiled in a bronze vessel, then it shall be scoured and rinsed in water. **29** “Every male among the priests may eat of it; **it is most holy**. **30** “But no sin offering of which any of the blood is brought into the tent of meeting to make atonement in the holy place shall be eaten; it shall be burned with fire.

(Note: the reason the earthenware vessel was broken is likely because once something was made holy, it wasn't supposed to be used for common purposes anymore. Breaking the earthenware vessel ensured that didn't happen.)

The Hebrew word translated "become consecrated" is "qadash" (קָדַשׁ), and it also means "to make holy". In fact, many translations have something like: "will be holy" or "shall become holy" there for that reason. (Which you can easily confirm [here](#).)

Thus, the sin offering appears to be more about purification from sin than anything else.

That makes sense with what we saw about the consecration of the altar in [the article about sin offerings and the Day of Atonement](#). Remember that it was the blood of the sin offering (applied regularly over many days) that made the altar so holy.

It was the blood of a sin offering that did that.

Seriously.

Take a look:

Exodus 29:36-37

36 Each day you shall offer a bull as a **sin offering** for atonement, and you shall purify the altar when you make atonement for it, and you shall **anoint** it to consecrate it. **37** For seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and consecrate it; then the altar shall be most holy, and whatever touches the altar shall be holy.

Thus, the altar is anointed with the blood of the sin offering and that's what consecrates it. That's what makes it holy.

Notice that Exodus 29:36 begins by talking about a sin offering for atonement, then it links purification with atonement, and the sin offering is doing the purifying.

This shouldn't be surprising because we saw that "purification" is one definition of the word that's commonly translated "sin offering". However, it was a bit of a shock for me while I was doing the research for this article. For whatever reason, I hadn't looked into this word before now.

Most interestingly, the PSA crowd affirms this purification/cleansing understanding as well. Or at least some of them do. Whenever I do internet research on the topic, the website "Ligonier Ministries" always seems to pop up. They are staunchly in the PSA camp and yet their article on sin offerings fits this perspective extremely well.

The following is from a thoroughly PSA Perspective:

Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth understood that **sin is not an abstract concept but rather pollutes everything it touches**. Having successfully murdered Duncan, she thought her deed would go unpunished. Yet she did not account for the lingering filth of her evil. Despite her

best attempts to clean herself, she had to confess: “Here’s the smell of blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.”

The idea that sin brings pollution is thoroughly biblical, and the reality of this pollution was dealt with under the old covenant through the sin offering described in today’s passage. “Sin offering” is a perfectly acceptable translation of the Hebrew term in Leviticus 4, but **what the sin offering actually accomplished is better seen in the words purification offering**. The sin offering purified the sanctuary; it removed the defilement of sin that occurred when the people broke the covenant.

Our holy God cannot abide the presence of those people and things that are unclean (22:3), and each time people sinned under the old covenant, they dirtied themselves. The burnt offering solved the problem of the Lord’s wrath, but it did not purify the one offering the sacrifice. There still needed to be expiation, or the removal of sin’s pollution, from the worshipers and the instruments of worship. **The blood of the sin offering accomplished this cleansing**. The tabernacle that became defiled because it was located in the midst of a sinful people was cleansed by the blood of the sacrifice, and the sinner was made clean and able to stand before God again (4:1–5:13).

[Source](#).

So this idea is entirely consistent with PSA, at least according to Ligonier Ministries, and it has scholarly support as well, which we’ll look at soon.

As possible further evidence of this, God required a “sin offering” when no sin had been committed. This makes a lot of sense if it’s actually a “purification offering”, but doesn’t make sense if you think a sin offering is like a guilt offering. (*Offered when an Israelite incurs personal guilt.*)

Sin (purification/cleansing?) offerings when there is no sin?

Everyone seems familiar with the sin offerings in Leviticus 4, and many are also familiar with the sin offering on the Day of Atonement. However, Sin offerings were offered for other things as well.

In fact, Sin offerings were offered even when there was no sin.

There are several examples of this, like when a man or woman has an “unnatural discharge” in Leviticus 15:13-15 and 15:28-30 respectively, when a man completes a Nazarite vow in Numbers 6:13-17, and most tellingly, when a woman gives birth.

Yes, when a woman gives birth.

We’ll look at the first half of the passage first.

(*And yes, I’ll have a possible explanation for why purification was longer for girls than for boys later once we have enough context; it’s actually something of a compliment to women if I’m right*)

Leviticus 12:1-5

1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying:

“When a woman gives birth and bears a male *child*, then **she shall be unclean for seven days**, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. 3 “On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. 4 “Then she shall remain in the blood of *her* purification for thirty-three days; **she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until the days of her purification are completed**. 5 “But if she bears a female *child*, then she shall be unclean for two weeks, as in her menstruation; and she shall remain in the blood of *her* purification for sixty-six days.

So, if it’s a boy, 7 days + 33 days = 40 days; the number of preparation. For a girl, those numbers are doubled for 80 days of preparation. (and again, it’s a compliment to women if it’s right about why, which we’ll look at lower down.)

(Note: the mandatory purification and “unclean time” was likely intended as a blessing to the new mother. It would prevent her from going back to housework for at least a week so she could recover, and prevent her from doing many things for over a month, again so she could recover. It would also reduce infant mortality from sickness since she wouldn’t be able to have a crowd of visitors for at least a week.)

Most importantly for this article, it’s about purification.

Keep that in mind as we read on.

Leviticus 12:6-8

6 “When **the days of her purification are completed**, for a son or for a daughter, **she shall bring to the priest** at the doorway of the tent of meeting a one year old lamb for a burnt offering and **a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering**. 7 “Then **he shall offer it before the LORD and make atonement for her, and she shall be cleansed from the flow of her blood**. This is the law for her who bears a *child*, whether a male or a female. 8 “But if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, the one for a burnt offering and the other for a **sin offering**; and the priest shall **make atonement for her, and she will be clean.**”

Notice verses 7 and 8, where atonement is connected with cleansing.

We’ve already seen that there’s a connection there, and please keep that in mind.

Now, both in the garden of Eden and after the flood, God commanded man to “be fruitful, multiply, and fill the Earth”. Thus, having children is literally obeying a command from God. Thus, the “sin offering” can’t be to get rid of the “sin of childbirth” because childbirth most definitely isn’t a sin. And yet, the new mother was required to bring a “sin offering” or maybe it’s actually a “purification offering”? (For ceremonial uncleanness?)

The stated reason is cleansing/purification, so why wouldn't "purification offering" be the right meaning here?

In fact, every time the "sin offering" is required, it's always for purification purposes.

Or at least, I couldn't find a place where it was offered for another reason! except for "atonement". It's connected with atonement several times, and the connection is very easy to explain, which we'll do in just a moment.

Thus, in accordance with the lexical definition, the "sin offering" makes far more sense as a "purification offering".

It very definitely was used to cleanse/purify things, including cleansing them from the pollution from sin. But more commonly, as in the case of a woman giving birth, it was to cleanse ceremonial uncleanness.

Now, Jesus is called our "sin offering" as we saw in the article on propitiation and His blood cleanses us from our sin. We'll look at those verses later, but please keep that in mind while we unwind the connection between atonement and "sin purification offerings".

The "sin purification offering" and "atonement"

We covered the definition of "atonement" at length in [the article on atonement](#). To summarize/recap, the Hebrew word for "atonement" means "To cover over a wrongdoing so that the wrongdoing is overlooked in order to bring reconciliation".

Importantly, the focus is on reconciliation.

As we saw in the article on atonement, the whole purpose of atonement is to bring the two parties back together. That is, to "make at one" (*reconcile*) two parties that aren't "at one" because of the wrongdoing! but what about when there's no wrong doing, like in childbirth?

As previously stated, having children obviously isn't a crime because God commanded us to do it. Yet despite that, the woman had to bring a "sin purification offering" and also the priest had to "make atonement" (i.e. "create reconciliation") for her.

Why?

The answer might actually be pretty simple if you remember that atonement = reconciliation.

The **moral** sins required the moral reconciliation of forgiveness, while the **ceremonial** "sins" (uncleanness) required the ceremonial reconciliation of cleansing!

and both types of reconciliation were called "atonement"

Yes, it really might be that simple.

- When an Israelite sinned, he needed God's forgiveness to be (*morally*) reconciled to God.
- When an Israelite became unclean, he needed cleansing to be (*ceremonially*) reconciled to God.

Because **כַּפָּרָה** is the Hebrew word that means **reconciliation**, and because both moral sins and ceremonial **טְמֵאוּת** (*uncleanness*) required reconciliation to be fully accepted by God again, it seems like **כַּפָּרָה** is used of **both** types of reconciliation.

Again, it really might be that simple.

They are both about being **reconciled** to God, though one is in a ceremonial sense and the other in a moral sense.

Here's the problem: The Hebrew vocabulary often doesn't distinguish moral/true sins from ceremonial sins/uncleanness.

Well, sort of.

We do have words like **חַטָּאת**, which aren't the same as **טְמֵאוּת**, and there are others. **However, the words used to *remedy* sin/uncleanness appear to be the same, words like **אָתוּמָה**.** Atonement is used for both moral sins and ceremonial **טְמֵאוּת**/uncleanness. Another example, **sin purification offerings were offered *both* when an Israelite sinned, *and also* for certain types of uncleanness.** There are other examples as well, but they aren't as related to our topic of Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA).

Anyway!

The fact that **אָתוּמָה (*kaphar*) and certain types of offerings were offered for **both** true sins and for uncleanness confuses our modern Western minds.**

(It certainly confused me before I started the research for this article.)

Thus, we tend to think it's always about sin, but that's not true. Sometimes it was, sometimes it wasn't. The **sin** purification offering for giving birth is a perfect example. That **sin** purification offering was for ceremonial uncleanness, not a moral sin. Conversely, the specific type of guilt offering required when an Israelite sinned was sometimes also a sin offering. That confuses things for us modern Christians who don't understand things the way they did.

So, let's get a better and more accurate perspective to help sort things out.

A better perspective

We talked earlier about how sins defiled the land. God pictured this defilement of sin with the Levitical system of purity and impurity, but there's more to it than that. For the rest, I'll lean on some scholarship. The following quote from Dr. Michael Heiser is a very concise way of putting it and should help explain things.

Here's the quote: (*red emphasis mine.*)

Yahweh is so *other* as to be incomprehensible without the façade of something familiar. And yet for Israel, his otherness would need to remain an ever-present reality, sensed at all times.

The concept of *otherness* was at the core of the Israelite identity. Otherness is the core of holiness. **The Hebrew vocabulary for holiness means to be set apart or to be distinct. While the idea has a moral dimension related to conduct, it is not intrinsically about morality. It is about distinction.** Israel's identification with Yahweh by virtue of his covenant with Abraham and the terms of the covenant at Sinai meant that, as Leviticus 19:2 concisely summarizes, Israelites were to be set apart (â€œholyâ€) as Yahweh was set apart (â€œholyâ€).

Yahweh's complete otherness was reinforced in the minds of Israelites through worship and sacrifice. Yahweh was not only the source of Israel's lifeâ€he was life. Yahweh was complete in his perfections. Yahweh was not of Earth, a place where there is death, disease, and imperfection. His realm is supernatural; ours is terrestrial. The space he occupies is sacred and made otherworldly by his presence. The space we occupy is â€œprofaneâ€ or ordinary. Yahweh is the antithesis of ordinary. Humans must be invited and purified to occupy the same space.

Many laws in the Torah illustrate this worldview and its messaging. Whether priest or not, male or female, **people could be disqualified from sacred space by a variety of activities and conditions.** Examples include sexual activity, bodily emissions, physical handicaps, contact with a dead body, and childbirth.

The logic of such exclusions is simple, yet foreign to our modern clinical minds. Sexual intercourse, emissions of sexual fluids, uterine discharges, and menstruation were not considered unclean out of prudishness. Rather, **the concept was that the body had lost the fluids that contain, create, and sustain life. That which is not whole and is associated with loss of life cannot enter Yahweh's presence until ritual restoration rectified that status.** The same reasoning is behind the ritually unclean status of those with physical handicaps, infected with disease, and who have touched a corpse, animal or human. **Yahweh's presence meant life and perfection, not death and defectiveness. These laws kept the community conscious of Yahweh's otherness.**

â€œThe Unseen Realmâ€ by Dr. Michael S. Heiser, pages 171-172

Let me quote a few of those sentences again (*though out of order*) to make sure the point isn't missed:

The Hebrew vocabulary for **holiness** means to be set apart or to be distinct. While the idea has a moral dimension related to conduct, **it is not intrinsically about morality.** It is about *distinction.*

Yahweh's presence meant life and perfection, not death and defectiveness.

Rather, the concept was that the body had lost the fluids that contain, create, and sustain life. **That which is not whole and is associated with loss of life cannot enter Yahweh's presence until ritual restoration rectified that status.**

Whenever you became "not like God" in some significant way *in a ceremonial sense*, you committed a "sin" and pardon the expression "sin" but it's like a ceremonial sin which is **not** a moral problem; it's a **ceremonial** problem. Remember, just because you became unclean "like giving birth, having sex, etc." didn't mean you sinned. It meant that you were *ceremonially* unclean i.e. not like God in some way "because you lost something that created or sustained life.

It's a picture.

Yes, it's that simple.

Once you understand that, the logic behind the sacrifices becomes more clear.

The logic behind sin-purification offerings

We need to start by defining "sin" first. You've probably heard before that sin is "missing the mark", and that's not wrong.

Definition: Sin, sin offering

Meaning: an offence, its penalty, occasion, sacrifice, expiation, an offender

Word Origin: Derived from the root חָטָא (*chata*), meaning "to miss" or "to sin."

Effectively, sin means that you missed the mark of trying to be like God. Thus, when you sin, you become "not like God". As you saw from that quote above, God is life. Here is the most relevant parts of that quote as a reminder, and yes I'm quoting the exact same section twice, mostly because it's important.

The Hebrew vocabulary for **holiness** means to be set apart or to be distinct. While the idea has a moral dimension related to conduct, **it is not intrinsically about morality**. It is about *distinction*.

Yahweh's presence meant life and perfection, not death and defectiveness.

Rather, the concept was that the body had lost the fluids that contain, create, and sustain life. **That which is not whole and is associated with loss of life cannot enter Yahweh's presence until ritual restoration rectified that status.**

The logic is that anything thatâ€™s â€œnot like Godâ€ needs to be made like God (as much as is possible for mortals) before it can be in His presence.

This applies whether the person became unclean or committed a sin. Ritually, the solution was treated somewhat similarly in terms of the sacrifices, but not the same. (*More on that in a moment.*)

The reason they were treated similarly is because both sins and uncleanness made the Israelite â€œnot like Godâ€ in some way. **Thus, you can think of the ~~sin~~ purification offering as a â€œnot-like-God-purification offeringâ€.** True, one was obviously morally wrong and the other wasnâ€™t, but they were both ways of being â€œnot-like-Godâ€. Thus, the personâ€™s â€œnot-like-Godnessâ€ had to be purified.

Remember:

- Life is like God.
- Sin and death are not like God

Thus, when you lose (expel) a fluid that supports, creates, or maintains life, you have â€œlost lifeâ€, and thus have become â€œnot-like-Godâ€ in a ceremonial/pictorial sense.

Again, itâ€™s a picture.

A woman doesnâ€™t literally â€œlose lifeâ€ when she gives birth, and a man doesnâ€™t literally â€œlose lifeâ€ when he has a seminal emission. However, both those things made a person unclean because â€œ in a ceremonial/pictorial sense â€œ the person had â€œlost lifeâ€ by losing the things that support, maintain, or create life.

Now, minor â€œlosses of lifeâ€ â€œ expulsion of life-giving or life-sustaining things â€œ only made a person unclean temporarily with no sacrifice.

For example:

Leviticus 15:16

16 â€œNow if a man has a seminal emission, he shall bathe all his body in water and be unclean until evening.

For normal and minor â€œlosses of lifeâ€ (*i.e., life-giving/maintaining things*), it didnâ€™t take long for your body to â€œregenerateâ€ the lost life. For more major â€œlosses of lifeâ€, it took a bit longer, as you see in the next verse.

Leviticus 15:19

19 â€œWhen a woman has a discharge, if her discharge in her body is blood, she shall continue in her menstrual impurity for seven days; and whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening.

During menstruation, women lose a lot more blood than a man does in a seminal emission. Further, blood = life (as we saw in [a previous article](#)), so the loss of blood was more serious than a seminal emission. Thus, it takes longer to regenerate the “lost life”.

But those are normal/common occurrences.

What about uncommon ones like birth?

Well, can you think of anything (except for dying) that more literally “loses life” in the sense of life leaving the body than a birth does? A whole life (the baby) literally leaves the mother’s body!

That’s why the recovery time is so long, 40 days for a boy, and 80 days for a girl.

Why was the girl longer?

Again, I think it’s about life.

A man typically contributes less than a teaspoon of fluid to create a new life. A mother’s entire body is involved in creating the new life for 9 months. Thus, girls contribute more “life” than boys do from a purely resource perspective. Thus, because a mother gives more resources to a baby than a father does, when the mother gives birth to a girl, she’s lost “more life” than she would with a boy. Lose more life = take longer to recover.

Again, just ceremonially/pictorially.

(And there’s an interesting counterpoint to this in Genesis 5:3 regarding the man’s contribution to offspring, but we don’t have time/space to explore that here because it’s off-topic)

Next, we’ll look at something that occurred to me while I was writing this article. It’s something that I haven’t heard others mention, but it seems to make sense.

Is “kaphar” (atonement/reconciliation) always ceremonial in the law?

To clarify, I mean when it’s used in a ceremonial sense. We saw in the article about atonement that it does certainly mean to “reconcile” or “appease” after a wrong, such as in Genesis 32:20 where Jacob wants to “kaphar” Esau with a gift. You can see a list of all the passages where “kaphar” is used in the Bible [here](#), and there are definitely passages where “reconcile” (or “forgive”) is clearly the intended sense.

However, context determines meaning.

When a word has more than one possible meaning, we look at the word’s context to determine which meaning is intended. For example, if I said “she has fair skin”, you would never think that her skin makes impartial decisions like you would if I said: “She is a fair judge of the contest.”

Context determines meaning. This is one of the cardinal rules of interpretation, and translation as well.

So letâ€™s talk about the ceremonial context of â€œkapharâ€ for a moment.

As we saw earlier, â€œkapharâ€ (*atonement/reconciliation*) is used for all kinds of things. The two things weâ€™ll focus on are the consecration of the altar and childbirth. Both are specifically stated to â€œkapharâ€ (*make atonement*) when there is no sin involved. Further, neither was about sin, but rather they were about ceremonial cleanness and the ability to enter sacred space. This lends context to the other places where â€œatonementâ€ was made, and it tells us something about them.

Itâ€™s my suspicion that â€œkapharâ€ (*make atonement*) in the Levitical sacrificial system ***only*** referred to ceremonial reconciliation because of uncleanness, and ***never*** to moral reconciliation after sin.

Can I prove that? No.

However, given that ~~sin~~ purification offerings were offered for things that werenâ€™t sins, it makes a lot of sense to me. That goes double because of the passage on ~~sin~~ purification offerings.

Leviticus 4:31

31â€ Then he shall remove all its fat, just as the fat was removed from the sacrifice of peace offerings; and the priest shall offer it up in smoke on the altar for a soothing aroma to the LORD. **Thus the priest shall make atonement for him, and he will be forgiven.**

Notice that â€œmake atonementâ€ is different from being forgiven. The construction doesnâ€™t link them closely together at all. In fact, thereâ€™s a disjunctive accent in the Hebrew text to clearly mark a break between â€œfor himâ€ and â€œand he will be forgivenâ€, which is indicated by the comma in English. (*You can confirm that in an interlinear Bible [here](#), and you can find more about Hebrew accents [here](#). Look for the disjunctive accent â€œTiphchahâ€ on the second page.*) Thus, the Hebrew seems clear that they are ***not*** the same thing, but rather two different things.

One more thing:

Conspicuously absent from the section is a statement about the manâ€™s state of â€œcleannessâ€. That is, heâ€™s never stated to have been cleansedâ€ unless he was.

Again, if â€œkapharâ€ is primarily, or even exclusively, about ceremonial reconciliation with God, then that important point actually was addressed, we just miss it with our modern Western eyes.

Since â€œkapharâ€ very definitely was used for ceremonial purification, and rather a lot, why couldnâ€™t it be about that here?

In fact, there are only two places *when itâ€™s used in a Levitical sacrificial context* that Iâ€™ve seen where it *might* be tied to forgiving sins. Weâ€™ve just looked at the one, and I think the lack of a statement about the manâ€™s purity level is soft evidence that itâ€™s about ceremonial purity and not forgiveness of sin. Further, the disjunctive accent in the Hebrew text seems to make this separation between â€œatonementâ€ and forgiveness even clearer.

The other place is in Numbers, and we already looked at it above. Thus, we'll just look at the relevant verse since we've already seen the context.

Numbers 15:28

28 The priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who goes astray when he sins unintentionally, **making atonement for him that he may be forgiven.**

If **atonement** (kaphar) is about reconciliation and it is as we saw in [the article on atonement](#) then why does reconciliation need to take place as a prerequisite first **before** the sin could be forgiven?

Reconciliation before forgiveness?

Does that even make sense?

Anyone?

Now, from a PSA perspective, they would likely redefine **atonement** and say that you needed the death of the animal to picture how God needed Jesus's death before He could forgive/pardon us. However, I find that unconvincing in light of what we've seen in this article, the requirement to redefine **atonement**, and especially how **atonement** was made for objects and things that aren't sinful.

However, if we understand **kaphar to be about ceremonial reconciliation, then it makes perfect sense.**

It explains so much, like:

- Why **kaphar** was made for objects (*using a **sin** purification offering by the way.*)
- Why **kaphar** was required for things that weren't sinful, like childbirth.
- Why **kaphar** always seems to be separated from forgiveness.

So really, there are three options **in a Levitical context**:

1. **kaphar** is primarily (*or exclusively*) about forgiving sins. This view runs into huge problems right off the bat though because atonement was made for objects, and objects don't sin. Further, it was required for things that weren't sins, like childbirth.
2. **kaphar** is about both forgiving sins and also about ceremonial uncleanness. This view works and is likely the most defensible position because no matter how it's used, you can agree. You could say that it was about sin with the **sin** purification offering, and about cleanness when it comes to objects and childbirth. It's inconsistent because forgiveness and **kaphar** seem different, but it's not so inconsistent that it's absurd.
3. **kaphar** is primarily (*or exclusively*) about ceremonial cleanness. This view has the advantage of working in every place that I'm aware of. It explains virtually every instance of its use and if you understand it as **ceremonial reconciliation**, it makes perfect sense.

I know which one I'm persuaded of.

I could be wrong of course . Lord knows I've been wrong before and I'm open to changing my mind. However, that 3rd understanding harmonizes everything right-into perfectly, so that's where I currently stand.

Now, all of that said! I just learned something new.

No, seriously.

I had written all of the above before I found a crucial piece of data on this topic. We'll cover that under the next heading.

The homonym problem and atonement

As a refresher, homonyms are words that sound the same but have different meanings. For example, buy and bye are pronounced the same, but have a different meaning. Even more confusing, **some homonyms are even spelled the exact same way but have different meanings.** For example:

- He runs 2 miles every morning
- He runs an office supply company

The first usage means to move at a high rate of speed using two feet, the second means to be in charge of and lead something. That's two different words with two different meanings that are spelled and pronounced the exact same way. For us, it's obvious which is which. However, I'm sure you can see how it might be confusing for non-native speakers. *(As similar homonyms in other languages would be confusing for native English speakers.)*

The Hebrew word kaphar (atonement) has a homonym exactly like this; it's spelled and pronounced the exact same way, but has a different meaning.

Now, I don't expect you to take my word on this. Here's a Hebrew website that explicitly says that, and we'll look at some scholarship about it in a moment.

There are four different roots that are all spelled קפר (kpr) There doesn't seem to be an etymological relationship between these four, but their similarities may have prompted the poetic writers of the Bible to engage in word play.

[Source.](#)

And on the definition of the word:

The important root קפר (kpr) may originally have had to do with covering or hiding, but **in the Bible it appears to be used solely in the sense of to atone or purge**, with the objective of rightful freedom.

[Source.](#)

That definition of “purge” by itself is highly illuminating, but there’s scholarship on it that will explain things better than I can. I discovered this while listening to a podcast series on Leviticus by the late, great biblical scholar Dr. Michael S. Heiser. (You can watch/listen to on YouTube [here](#), or you can hear the full version on [his podcast website](#), starting at ep. 63.)

For those who don’t know of him, Dr. Heiser is credentialed up to wazoo.

From Michael Heiser’s website:

I’m a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania (M.A., Ancient History) and the University of Wisconsin- Madison (M.A., Ph.D., Hebrew Bible and Semitic Studies). I have a dozen years of classroom teaching experience on the college level and another ten in distance education. I’m currently a Scholar-in-Residence at Logos Bible Software, a company that produces ancient text databases and other digital resources for study of the ancient world and biblical studies. You can get a more detailed answer to my academic background by reading through [my CV](#).

This guy knows his stuff so well that he worked at Logos Bible Software, which is what a lot of pastors, theologians, and teachers use for deep research. Most importantly for our discussion, he had a PhD in “Hebrew Bible and Semitic Studies”, and “studies” there includes languages. You can look up his resume at the link in the quote; it’s seriously impressive.

He knows his stuff, and further, he definitely sounds like a PSA guy.

If you listen to his podcast on Leviticus, at one point he makes this very clear.

(Note: the quotations from Dr. Heiser’s Leviticus podcast in this article are copy/pasted from the kindle text version of the podcast, which is available for \$0.99 on amazon; just search “Michael Heiser Leviticus” and it’ll pop right up. I figured that was better than trying to manually transcribe it.)

If you have done any reading on how modern scholarship, even within evangelicalism, views the atonement of Christ, it amazes me how so many scholars and people try to rid the theology of atonement from substitution. Substitutionary atonement has somehow become offensive in our culture, and it’s probably because it involves blood. Now we have different views of the atonement. I’m not saying that the atonement doesn’t include some of these other aspects, but what I am saying is that you do not understand atonement, and no Israelite would’ve thought about atonement the way you’re thinking about it, if you divorce substitution from it. That is intrinsic to the whole idea, and these blood sacrifices are in some way typological of what Jesus did. If you’re stripping out the principle of substitutionary atonement from the atonement picture, you’re not understanding it the way in ancient Israelite would’ve understood it. It would’ve been the first thing that an ancient Israelite thought of with purging someone from their impurity.

Source: Kindle version of Dr. Michael Heiser's™ podcast series on Leviticus, page 224, 67%

Again, he sounds like a PSA guy.

Oddly, while he is scrupulously careful about his sourcing for virtually everything, he only provides one quote to support the above. That quote also provides no evidence, either scriptural or historical. I found that very odd given how meticulously sourced everything else was. Thus, the lack of sourcing seemed odd and stands out because, as far as I recall, it was the only unsupported assertion in the entire series. I find that interesting.

Make of it what you will.

Even more odd, despite saying that substitution is central to the Israelite understanding of sacrifice, he only mentions it one time in his Leviticus series. (*The area around the quote above, which is almost parenthetical in nature.*) I struggle to see how it could be so central to the Levitical sacrificial system if someone like Dr. Heiser can go through the entire book of Leviticus and only mention it once in passing.

But, I digress.

Now, as we covered in a previous article, not all substitution involves **penal** substitution.

For example, Athanasius's™ view was entirely predicated on substitution, but not on penal substitution.

Thus, while Dr. Heiser is definitely a PSA guy, it's™ entirely possible to accept the statement above as 100% true without accepting PSA. Again, Athanasius's™ view fits perfectly into the statement above even though Athanasius wasn't™ a PSA guy.

Anyway!

In a podcast series that he did on Leviticus (*again, link above*), he talks about the definitions of both **atonement** and also **sin offering**.

Michael Heiser on what **atonement means**

To add a bit of context first, Hebrew verbs are composed of three letters. The vowels are dots or dashes around the letters. So the word **kaphar**, is spelled with only three letters that roughly correspond to K-P-R in English (*The Hebrew letter for **ph** can also sound like an **af**.*)

This is from the podcast linked above, and it's™ **highly** illuminating.

When we see atonement in our English translation, we think there's a sin issue. Yet in this particular instance that is not the case. In fact that is not the case in many particular instances. Part of the problem is that there are half a dozen different Hebrew words with the same consonants *kpr* as the one that occurs in this passage. This is what's known as a *homonym problem*. Hebrew, like English, has words that are spelled exactly the same way but mean different things.

Sometimes *kopher* means just a gift, a ransom, something that I exchange to protect me or work out some sort of arrangement so that I'm safe. It's one of four nouns that are spelled the same way in Hebrew, *kopher*. If you actually look this up in lexicon, the one that occurs in Leviticus 1:4 is labeled *kopher* 4. It's the fourth lemma.

For those of you who attempt some original language researching your Bible study, hopefully you have better tools than a Strong's concordance. You must move on to something better because you need a lexicon that will list out the homonyms for you. You can't assume that the Hebrew word you're looking at in a primitive tool like Strong's is always the same word where those three consonants occur. In many cases, it's not.

Now in a basic sense, the verb *kaphar* means to purge. We're going to hit other passages where the atonement language of your English translation is going to point to one of the verbs. Again, they're six different *kpr* words in Hebrew, four of them are nouns, two of them are verbs. Occasionally, we're going to hit a verb that does have something to do with taking care of an offense or sin. And when we hit those, I'll return to this discussion to tell you which one it is. However, in many cases when the verb is used, it means to purge. It comes from an Akkadian word *kuppuru*, which means to wipe clean. That's significant because of things that we'll run into in Leviticus and other places in the Old Testament. For instance, the verb is used often with respect to purging the tabernacle and the altar.

If you've ever read or, God forbid, heard a sermon on Leviticus and have been told that this atonement language refers to cleansing the offerer of sin, be very careful. Look at what the direct object is, and in many cases the English translations will completely obscure it for you. Try to use an interlinear or a reverse interlinear. In many cases, the blood of the offering will be used to purge the tabernacle, the sacred space, the altar, or this or that vessel. It's never applied to the human offerer. The blood is to make sure that sacred space is not rendered impure by a common human being who is not sanctified like a priest who is sanctified and can occupy sacred space. A lot of the sacrificial system is about preparing sacred space for your visit or preparing sacred space that God will deem fit to spend time there. It's really not about what goes on with the offerer's sin.

Source: Kindle version of Dr. Michael Heiser's podcast series on Leviticus, page 36, 11%

So, the Hebrew verb K-P-R (כָּפַר) is like **he runs** in English; the exact same word with the exact same spelling can mean two **completely different** things.

The real question is: which one was intended?

- K-P-R that means **atonement** in the sense of reconciliation
- K-P-R that means **to purge** in the sense of cleansing

As in the example above with **he runs**, the thing that determines which is intended is context. That's how you know that **he runs an office supply company** doesn't mean that he travels around an office on two legs at a high rate of speed, and also how you know that **he runs 2 miles every morning** doesn't mean that he leads and directs 2 miles to do something every morning.

Context determines meaning, both in English and especially in Hebrew.

So which meaning of K-P-R fits the context better?

Well, as we've already seen, understanding it as **reconciliation** has major problems when it comes to things like a woman giving birth. Understanding it as **ceremonial reconciliation** has far fewer problems, and that's where I would've landed before I found the homonym problem. However, contextually, **to purge** in the sense of purifying/cleansing makes more sense. A lot more sense.

If you consider **atonement means **to purge** (cleanse), then all of a sudden, everything makes perfect sense.**

For example, when a woman who has given birth brings a **sin** purification offering, the priest does the purging (**atonement**). I'm going to pull out a fragment of a sentence from the passage below to highlight it before we look at the whole thing:

he shall **make atonement for her, and she shall be cleansed**

Notice that the result of **atonement (**purging/purifying**) is that she's cleansed.**

So we have a **sin** purification offering and **atonement** means to purge/cleanse. Here's the passage with that understanding.

Leviticus 12:6-8 (modified)

6 When the days of her **purification** are completed, for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the doorway of the tent of meeting a one year old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a **sin purification offering**. **7** Then he shall offer it before the LORD and ~~make atonement~~ **purify for her, and she shall be cleansed from the flow of her blood**. This is the law for her who bears a *child*, whether a male or a female. **8** But if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, the one for a burnt offering and the other for a **sin purification offering; and the**

priest shall ~~make atonement~~ purify for her, and she will be clean.

Doesn't that make way more sense than reconciliation " even ceremonial reconciliation " and a "sin offering" to remove her sin? (*Because having a baby obviously isn't a sin.*)

This also makes perfect sense with what we saw about sin polluting the land. A person's "uncleanness" was thought to pollute the land, including the land the Tabernacle was on. The worry was that if they didn't keep it "clean enough", God might decide to leave because he didn't want to live in a dirty house. (*Which we saw earlier.*) Again, the land needed to be purged (*purified*) to keep it clean.

Again, because the two words are spelled the same way, the real question is which makes more sense in context.

Contextually, saying that "atonement" means "purging" in the sense of cleansing/decontamination makes perfect sense because they kept "God's house" clean with ~~atonement~~ purging and ~~sin~~ purification offerings.

Now, as a point of intellectual honesty, **it's entirely legitimate for a PSA supporter to say that "atonement" in the sense of reconciliation was the intended sense.** Again, we're dealing with homonyms so I don't want to get too dogmatic about which one is correct. I think the context clearly leans toward purging, but if a PSA fellow says he thinks the context supports reconciliation more, that's not illegitimate. I think that's wrong, but I can't say that it's illegitimate.

By that same token, a PSA fellow can't say that the purging understanding is illegitimate, because again, we're dealing with homonyms.

Neither side can say that the other's position is illegitimate; they can only argue which fits the context better.

Contextually, the reconciliation view has large issues with certain passages, like when a woman gives birth. The purging/purification position has none of those issues and better contextual support as well (*at least in my opinion.*)

This also has implications for how we understand the lid of the ark of the covenant, which has traditionally been translated "mercy seat"

Michael Heiser on the proper translation of "mercy seat"

Continuing from the above, if "atonement" actually means "purging", then the lid of the ark (*which derives from the same word*) likely has a meaning that relates to purging in some way. Well, thankfully Dr. Heiser did touch on that.

In verses 13-15, "mercy seat" is a common, traditional translation, but it is not a good translation. The reason it's translated as "mercy seat" is because the noun

kapporeth formed from the lemma related to the verb kipper. **The verb for *â€œatonementâ€œ* (kipper) has a noun equivalent, kapporeth.** Since the verb gets this atonement language associated with it, the noun is referred to as the *â€œmercy seatâ€œ* because the result of the atonement is God showing mercy. This, this is an abstracted interpretive translation.

More literally, if atonement (kipper) means to purge, then kapporeth should be the place of purging. We should focus on the location, not the result, because calling it the *â€œmercy seatâ€œ* reads the theological result into the lemma, and thatâ€™s why it isnâ€™t a good translation.

Source: Kindle version of Dr. Michael Heiserâ€™s podcast series on Leviticus, page 202, 61%

He then talks about how the lid of the ark was also (*pictorially*) Godâ€™s throne. Itâ€™s fascinating and he makes an excellent argument, but sadly, itâ€™s not relevant to PSA so weâ€™ll have to skip it for space. (*I recommend you listen to his whole Leviticus series though because itâ€™s probably the best teaching Iâ€™ve ever heard on the Levitical sacrificial system.*)

The blood was brought into the Holy of Holies, and it was sprinkled on the throne seat. It was applied thereafter to the horns of the altar and the language is, ***â€œHe shall make atonement for the Holy Place.â€œ*** ***He shall make atonement for the altar,*** which, in other words, meant that ***he would purge the lid of the ark, the throne seat. He should purge the altar, the Holy Place, and its objects. This was not about forgiveness of moral wrongs because objects canâ€™t commit sins. It was about the decontamination and purging of impurity.***

Source: Kindle version of Dr. Michael Heiserâ€™s podcast series on Leviticus, 205, 62%

This *â€œpurgingâ€œ* understanding is much more consistent when you look at the overall sacrificial system. It also makes more sense than the idea that *â€œatonementâ€œ* means reconciliation after sin, or even ceremonial reconciliation. Again, *â€œatonementâ€œ* almost never deals with people and instead only deals with objects.

Now, this *â€œpurgingâ€œ* was done with a *sin* purification offering, and Michael Heiser addressed those as well.

Michael Heiser on what the *â€œsin offeringâ€œ* means

Before the quoted bit below, he was talking about how they bring a *â€œsin offeringâ€œ* *â€œ* i.e. a purification offering *â€œ* for childbirth, just like we saw above. He points out that childbirth isnâ€™t a sin (*obviously*), and then goes on to say the following. One disclaimer first: Iâ€™ve been quoting Thayerâ€™s lexical form of *â€œchattaâ€œ*, while he uses a variant spelling of *â€œhîlattaâ€œ*, which is the same word as *â€œchattaâ€œ*. (*Because the first sound is a guttural for which we donâ€™t have an English equivalent.*)

Here we go:

This alone should tell you that a translation in English like sin offering is misleading because it makes us think that there's something wrong with the person in a moral sense, yet that is not the point of the sin offering. **For all of these reasons, some have opted for purification offering, but there's also a textual exegetical reason why purification offering is better, and for this you have to know some Hebrew.**

Now if you're looking at this in a commentary or if you're listening to a sermon, you might read or hear that the word חַטָּאת comes from the verb חָטָא which means to sin, to miss the mark, or to offend. חַטָּאת is spelled with three Hebrew letters, חֵט, טֵט, and אֵלֶף.

So if it comes from the verb meaning to miss the mark, to sin, to offend, then surely the offering has something to do with moral offense. No, it doesn't. A lot of your preachers, and even some of your commentators, at least the ones that are sort of oriented to the English Bible, **will miss the fact that the noun, חַטָּאת here doubles the middle consonant.** If you've had some Hebrew, the middle consonant has a little dot in it which means it's doubled. It's חֵט, טֵט, אֵלֶף, and it ends with the T (tav) ending.

Source: Kindle version of Dr. Michael Heiser's podcast series on Leviticus, page 68-69, 20%

I'll interrupt to say that the difference is actually pretty huge, even in English. Tet is a Hebrew letter that sounds like T. So here's a word pair where a doubled vs. non-doubled T makes a huge difference: Biter versus Bitter. The addition of the second T makes a huge difference in what the word means, just like in Hebrew.

(By the way, the dot he's talking about is called a dagesh, whose function in this context is to double a consonant. You can find more information [here](#) if you like, but it won't help your understanding of this topic or article.)

Anyway, back to Dr. Heiser:

Believe it or not, it's actually important because what the doubled consonant tells us is that **the noun translated as sin offering is not just formed merely from this verb that means to miss the mark. It's formed from a specific form of that verb.** The noun חַטָּאת is formed from the Piel stem of this verb lemma, one that doubles the stem constant. That's significant because **in the Piel stem this verb doesn't mean to miss the mark or to offend. What it means is to cleanse or to purify. A better way to put it might be to decontaminate.** That's why the blood is applied to the sanctuary and to sacred objects. It shields and protects them from infection. It ensures decontamination.

The priests would decontaminate and insulate sacred space from this person who had inadvertently committed an offense.

Source: Kindle version of Dr. Michael Heiser's podcast series on Leviticus, page 69-70, 20%

The version above is from the notes from the podcast, which is only \$0.99 on amazon. However, if you listen to the podcast itself, there's a little more information. (*Because the notes clean up some of the "extra" musings. However, the "extra" musing are relevant here.*)

And so if you recognize "because you know a little Hebrew" that חַטָּאת is formed on the basis of the Pi-el stem of the root verb, then you will know that "sin offering" is not a good translation of חַטָּאת. The better offer "the better translation would be "purification offering", or I would even suggest "decontamination offering". That captures the point of what is happening. **And it's something that is again exegetically true; it's exegetically verifiable**

Source:

We already saw earlier that the relevant Hebrew word "chatta" does indeed mean to purify. Michael Heiser just explained exactly *when* it means that, which is when it's in the "chatta" form!

"almost certainly.

Here's the trouble, his argument is that the specific form of "chatta" means purification. However, that exact specific form is used in contexts where it can't mean that. For example, here's a verse where it's in *the exact same form* as it is in the various "sin offering" passages:

Genesis 4:7 (God talking to Cain)

"If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin (chatta) is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Obviously "purification" isn't the intended sense here, nor in a few other verses as well, even when it's in that specific form. In fact, you can see every single place in the Old Testament where that specific form is used [here](#). (*They spell it חַטָּאת, though. The opening "ch" or "ch" is a guttural sound we don't have in English, and should be pronounced like you're clearing your throat slightly, hence the difference in spelling.*)

Here's the thing that I hate about Hebrew: it's complicated. Thus Dr. Heiser isn't necessarily wrong.

Hebrew can be a complicated language that seems to contradict itself. The fact that the word for "sin" and the word for "purification" are sometimes the same word should demonstrate this perfectly. **Because of that, context is even more important in Hebrew than in other languages.**

In Hebrew, context is king.

Contextually speaking, what Dr. Heiser is saying makes *perfect* sense. I made that exact argument without the benefit of having a PhD in Hebrew, and I'm not about to say he's wrong because quite frankly, he knows *a lot* more about it than I do.

I'm bringing this up for completeness.

My goal here isn't to attack PSA, it's to find the truth.

As far as I can tell, Dr. Heiser is 100% correct. Further, contextually speaking, it makes perfect sense. Conversely, *sin offering* or *sin offering* makes almost no sense in light of one being required for things that aren't sinful like childbirth. However, there's always a possibility that even in the specific form of *chattah*, it could mean *sin offering*. I think that flies in the face of all the evidence we've seen, especially the contextual evidence, but it's not impossible.

And there's one more bit of evidence as well.

Hebrews 9:11-14

11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, *He entered* through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; **12** and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. **13** For *if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh*, **14** how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

According to the Holy Spirit's own interpretation, what does the blood of bulls and goats do?

Two things:

1. Sanctify (*i.e. make holy*)
2. Cleanse the flesh (*i.e. the body*)

If you'll remember, Hebrews 8-10 spends a lot of time talking about the *Day of Atonement*. On that day, there's a bull for a sin offering and a goat for a sin offering. Thus, according to Hebrews, what do those offerings do?

Cleanse the flesh.

And by the way, there's no debate about the Greek words used in Hebrews. They mean exactly what they are translated as, which gives us a lot of clarity on what the *sin offering* does because again, the Holy Spirit told us in Hebrews.

Thus, I'm at least 95% convinced that the purification offering is the correct understanding, and that last 5% is simply me allowing for new information that I could learn later.

(If I could be assured that there would be no new information, I'd be 98% or 99% sure.)

So that's my research, such as it is.

For the rest of this article, and indeed the rest of this series, I will assume that:

- The Purification offering is correct while the sin offering is not correct.
- In a Levitical/ceremonial context, the atonement means purging, i.e. purifying and/or cleansing

This brings us back to where we started: sin polluting the land.

The pollution of Sin and the remedy

One thing to notice about the sin purification offering: it's never, not even once, applied to the people. It's always applied to objects, but never to people. In fact, it's only stated to cleanse the people twice: **(1)** during the Day of Atonement. **(2)** when a woman gives birth. It's also notable that even in those two cases, the blood is never actually applied to the people themselves.

All the rest of the time, a sin purification offering cleanses objects, not people.

This is how they kept God's house clean.

Now, it might seem odd to clean something with blood, but that's because we modern Westerners are concerned with hygiene, not imagery. Remember why blood was used though:

Leviticus 17:11

11 For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for **it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.**

Remember, the atonement = purging (purifying) in the sense of cleansing. So it's life that cleanses! but cleanses what? The obvious answer based on what we've already seen sin and its effects, including its pollution/taint. **So we have blood/life cleansing from sin and its effects! does that sound familiar?** I hope so, because that idea becomes very important in the New Testament.

So blood/life was used to cleanse/purge sin, plus its resultant pollution and effects.

The picture here is that blood is life, and blood/life cleanses sin and its pollution/effects. Under the Law, this was applied to sacred objects to purify them. This is how they kept God's house clean. However, it also served another purpose, and that purpose was to foreshadow Christ.

Galatians 3:23-25

23 But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. **24** Therefore **the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ**, so that we may be justified by faith. **25** But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

The book of Hebrews, especially chapters 8-10, makes extensive use of the sacrificial system to explain what Jesus did to save us.

Weâ€™ll look more at that foreshadowing soon.

Next, weâ€™ll look at one final offering â€” one thatâ€™s thankfully completely uncontroversial and totally clear â€” before we move on to a recap, and then weâ€™ll see how all of this applies to PSA after the recap.

The First Fruit offering

This is pretty self-explanatory.

Leviticus 23:9-11 and 15-16

9 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **10** â€œSpeak to the sons of Israel and say to them, â€œWhen you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then **you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest.** **11** â€œHe shall wave the sheaf before the LORD for you to be accepted; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall wave it.

Effectively, you waved the offering in front of the altar to recognize that it came from God. You also brought other offerings as well along with this, but they arenâ€™t relevant to PSA, so I omitted them for space.

Yes, this section is very short (*for a change*) and only included because 1 Corinthians 15:20 calls Jesus the first fruits from the dead, which will become important later.

Recap of the sacrificial system

There are five major types of offerings:

- **The Burnt Offering**, which is more accurately understood as the **â€œdevotion offeringâ€**. The animal was burned completely up except for the hide, which was given to the priest. The complete burning of the animal symbolized complete devotion to God. (*Because the smoke of the animal went up to the sky/heaven where God was thought to be.*)

- **The Grain Offering**, which is more accurately understood as the **memorial offering**. This was grain and a few other things burned as a memorial and remembrance of what God had done, and to thank Him for that.
- **The Peace Offering**, which is more accurately understood as the **fellowship offering**. This was intended to be a **communal meal**, which the one offering the sacrifice, the priest, and even God Himself (*pictorially through the offering going up to the sky/heaven in smoke*) symbolically ate together.
- **The Guilt Offering**, which was offered because **the person had committed a sin and was guilty**. This offering sometimes wasn't a specific type, but one of the other types offered for the specific reason that the person was guilty. Thus, the other types could become a **guilt offering** in addition to its normal type if the reason it was offered is because the person was guilty of a personal sin.
- **The Sin Offering**, which is more accurately understood as the **purification offering**, in the sense that this offering would cleanse someone. The idea was that the person who sinned or became unclean had **lost life**, and since blood was life, the blood symbolically cleansed this **lack of life**.

Importantly, both sins and uncleanness were **not like God** in some way, and thus the person needed to be reconciled to God.

- A sin needed God's forgiveness and also ritual cleansing of the **not-like-Godness** to achieve reconciliation.
- Ceremonial **sins** (*uncleanness*) needed ritual cleansing of the **not-like-Godness** to achieve (*ceremonial*) reconciliation.

The word *atonement* in a Levitical sacrificial context is properly understood as *purging* in the sense of cleansing or purifying.

A people's sins defile the land, and certain serious sins defiled the Tabernacle itself.

Once every year on the Day of **Atonement** Purging/Cleansing, God had some "pardon the expression" but **spring cleaning** done. The Tabernacle was purified from the sins of the people because those sins polluted the land, and the Tabernacle was on the land.

The goal of all this was to ensure that the sins of the people didn't contaminate the sacred space that was the Tabernacle. **God was to be associated with life, wholeness, and virtue; thus, death, disease, and sin weren't allowed anywhere near God's house (the Tabernacle) until those things had been cleansed.** The concern was if they didn't keep God's house clean enough, He might leave.

The method of cleansing someone from sin, disease, and any **loss of life** was the purest form of life that Israel knew of: blood. **The picture is that the solution to Israel's sin, disease, and death problem was to cleanse/purify that problem with life/blood.**

Now we finally have enough context to look at how the above relates to PSA.

Does the Levitical sacrificial system support PSA?

Remember that Penal Substitutionary Atonement says that Jesus took the punishment for our sins from God vicariously in our place as our substitute so that we wouldn't have to be punished.

Do you see any of those elements in the Levitical sacrificial system as we've just seen it?

Me either.

I can't find even a single one.

In fact, after doing all the research (which is merely summarized here) I can't find PSA in the Levitical sacrificial system at all.

That's a major problem for PSA because the New Testament, especially Hebrews, regularly uses language from the Levitical sacrificial system to explain how Jesus saves us. Thus, if the elements of PSA can't be found anywhere in the entire system, then the odds of PSA being true are vanishingly low.

Yes, I know that PSA supporters will be thinking about passages like Isaiah 53, 1 Corinthians 5:21, and 1 Peter 3:19. I understand why, but I have the advantage of having studied the original languages; they don't necessarily say what you might think.

(Slight spoiler, 1 Cor 5:21 should read "He made Him who knew no sin, a sin offering for our benefit", which is supported by the best lexicons; we'll examine that in detail in a future article. Likewise, 1 Peter 3:19 should read "the righteous for the benefit of the unrighteous", because the Greek word there cannot be used to indicate substitution. As to Isaiah 53, I covered the most important phrase in [this article](#), and will do a full breakdown of it plus the end of Isaiah 52 later in this series.)

How does the Levitical sacrificial system point to Jesus?

Since we can't or at least I can't find anything in it that points to PSA, the next obvious question is this: "what does it point to?" We'll be able to get into a lot more detail in the following article (which will be about if death is a punishment from God or a result of sin), but we did get enough of an overview that there are two things we can definitively conclude.

#1: Cleansing from sin

We saw above that our "not-like-Godness" needed to be cleansed with a sin purification offering. There are several places in the New Testament where Jesus is called a "sin offering". We covered two of those places in the previous article about propitiation, but there are other places as well. We'll only look at one of them for brevity's sake, but there are others.

Here's how the NASB 1995 translates it, though the relevant part could be translated better:

Romans 8:3

3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and **as an offering for sin**, He condemned sin in the flesh,

The phrase "for sin" is two words in Greek: *peri hamartias* (the ending indicates the word's function in Greek). That's important because the Old Testament was translated into Greek before Jesus's day. This translation "which is called the Septuagint" often used that exact phrase of *peri hamartias* to translate the Hebrew that is usually translated in English as "sin offering". (Which of course is actually a purification offering, as we saw earlier.)

You can see this in an interlinear version of Leviticus 4 in the Septuagint [here](#) (link opens in new tab). I recommend using the "find in page" function of your browser and searching for #266, which is the reference number for *hamartia* (the Greek word for sin). Notice how often #266 is translated "sin offering" in the interlinear, and also how often the word *hamartia* is before it. (Often the word *sin* is between *hamartia* and *offering* because of Greek word association rules.)

Thus "and I cannot believe I'm about to say this" but the NIV, CSB, and HCSB actually translate that phrase better than the NASB 1995 or the NKJV. Yes, I was shocked too. This just proves that *even a blind hog finds an acorn once in a while*, and *even a stopped clock is right twice a day*.

Romans 8:3 (NIV)

For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending **his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering**. And so he condemned sin in the flesh,

Now, normally I would link to Biblehub and show you where in the definition of *hamartia* it says "sin offering". However, I can't do that because those lexicons don't list "sin offering" as a possible definition. Thus, just in case the Septuagint reference above doesn't convince you, I'll quote a higher-quality lexicon to demonstrate this.

Enter Bill Mounce.

As mentioned in the previous article, **Bill Mounce actually wrote the Greek grammar textbooks that many seminaries use to teach Greek to students**. This guy knows his stuff and he thankfully has an online Greek lexicon that we can consult. [Here's his entry on *hamartia*](#):

Definition:

error; offence, sin, Mt. 1:21; a principle or cause of sin, Rom. 7:7; proneness to sin, sinful propensity, Rom. 7:17, 20; guilt or imputation of sin, Jn. 9:41; Heb. 9:26; a guilty subject, **sin-offering**, expiatory victim, 2nd Cor. 5:21

(And for PSA supporters, please notice that Mounce specifically mentions 2 Cor 5:21 as a place where it means "sin offering")

As mentioned last article, one of the most respected Greek Lexicons is BDAG (*that is, the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich lexicon*). Unfortunately, it's not available for free anywhere online. However, BDAG specifically mentions "sin offering" as a meaning of "hamartia" under definitions #3 and #4. Again, it's not available for free online anywhere, so you'll have to trust that I'm telling the truth. (Or don't, that's why I referenced the Septuagint and quoted Mounce above.)

Anyway!

So the NIV got the translation more correct than the NASB 95 and the NKJV, which is incredibly rare, but can happen.

By the way, Jesus is called a "sin offering" (*purification offering*) many more times in the New Testament, but for some reason the phrase "sin offering" rarely shows up in English New Testaments. Here's a list of the places where "sin offering" should occur. (And if you want to see it translated that way, I translated these places that way, which you can see [here](#).)

- Romans 8:3
- 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Hebrews 5:1
- Hebrews 5:3
- Hebrews 10:6
- Hebrews 10:8
- Hebrews 13:11
- 1 Peter 3:18
- 1 John 2:2
- 1 John 4:10

Anyway!

The point is that Jesus is our sin purification offering.

That's important.

Hopefully that means more to you now because, again, it's important. The cleansing function of Jesus's blood is explicitly stated in many places, but the following one is probably the most concise:

1 John 1:7

but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and **the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.**

This "cleansing" function will be important in future articles in this series, so please keep it in mind. However, it's interesting that the ~~sin~~ purification offerings were only used to cleanse objects, never people! except on the Day of ~~Atonement~~ Purging/Cleansing.

Leviticus 16:29-30

29 "This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; **30** for **it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD.**

Hebrews chapters 8-10 make extensive use of the Day of Atonement to explain what Jesus did for us. Again, keep this in mind for future articles in this series because it'll be important.

#2: Eternal life

If you'll remember from earlier, sin in a literal sense (*because it leads to death*) and also uncleanness in a pictorial sense both cause a "loss of life" in the person. Ultimately, man has a "lack of life" problem, which is why God through Jesus offers us eternal life. As any biblically literate person will attest, Jesus came to give us eternal life. As we looked at in detail in the article on atonement, the life is in the blood. **Just like the ~~sin~~-purification offering pictorially replaced the "lost life" from uncleanness and sin, Jesus's blood actually replaces the life we lost due to our sin, and He gives us eternal life.**

We'll discuss the mechanics of this in a future article.

Conclusion

Since there's already a mid-article recap of the sacrificial system, we won't go over that again here. As an overview of the overview, the sacrificial system appears to have nothing whatsoever to do with Penal Substitutionary Atonement and/or vicarious punishment. It simply isn't present in any form. I don't see it at all. Not anywhere.

Instead, the sacrificial system was about purity, life, and death, and cleansing sin and death with life (*via blood*).

Israel's sins polluted the land, including the land that the Tabernacle was on. They used the blood of the ~~sin~~ purification offering to cleanse the pollution from the land in order to keep God's house clean. Once per year, there was a "spring cleaning" day called the Day of ~~Atonement~~ Purging/Cleansing where any sins that the people didn't know that they had committed were cleansed.

We talked in an earlier article about how the Day of ~~Atonement~~ Purging/Cleansing was indeed about cleansing. Since Hebrews 8-10 uses it to explain what Jesus did, what Jesus did apparently had a lot to do with cleansing from sin. This focus has been reconfirmed here after looking at the entire sacrificial system. **Whatever Jesus did to save us, its primary focus seems to be cleansing.** I simply donâ€™t see another way to look at the biblical data that makes sense.

Stepping away from the recap to my personal thoughts.

The more I look into PSA, the more fundamental flaws I find.

Except for its first core tenet that manâ€™s sin deserves Godâ€™s wrath, almost nothing about it stands up to scrutiny. And anecdotally, Iâ€™ve read a lot of scholarship both for and against PSA while researching this series. I tend to find the pro-PSA â€œscholarshipâ€ lacking in depth, nuance, and intellectual rigor. Conversely, some of the scholarship that doesnâ€™t support PSA seems to be deeper, more nuanced, and has more intellectual rigor.

Changing topics slightly, as the support for PSA crumbles, **Iâ€™ve been looking for a way to understand how Jesus saved us that is 100% biblical and doesnâ€™t suffer from PSAâ€™s issues. Thankfully, I think Iâ€™ve found it.** It fits everything perfectly and also goes back to the earliest church fathers. It wasnâ€™t until I started writing the article on death that it clicked. Iâ€™d explain here, but this article is already too long and more context is needed anyway. Thus, Iâ€™ll save it for the article after the next one (*after the one on death*) where itâ€™ll fit much better and there will be enough context for it to make sense.

Anywayâ€¦

The next article in this series will be on whether death is a punishment from God or a natural result of sinâ€¦ and I just realized something while typing this sentence. The statement: *â€œDeath is the punishment instituted by God for our sin.â€* could be considered a *â€œpillarâ€* of PSA. Anyway, weâ€™ll examine that in the next article. The rough draft is mostly finished, but it needs a bunch of cleanup/polishing work. Regardless, it *theoretically* shouldnâ€™t take too longâ€¦ theoretically. (*Iâ€™m hoping just a week or two.*)

Iâ€™ll see you all there and until then, God Bless. ðŸ™,

EDIT: Hereâ€™s [the link to the article on death](#). Enjoy!