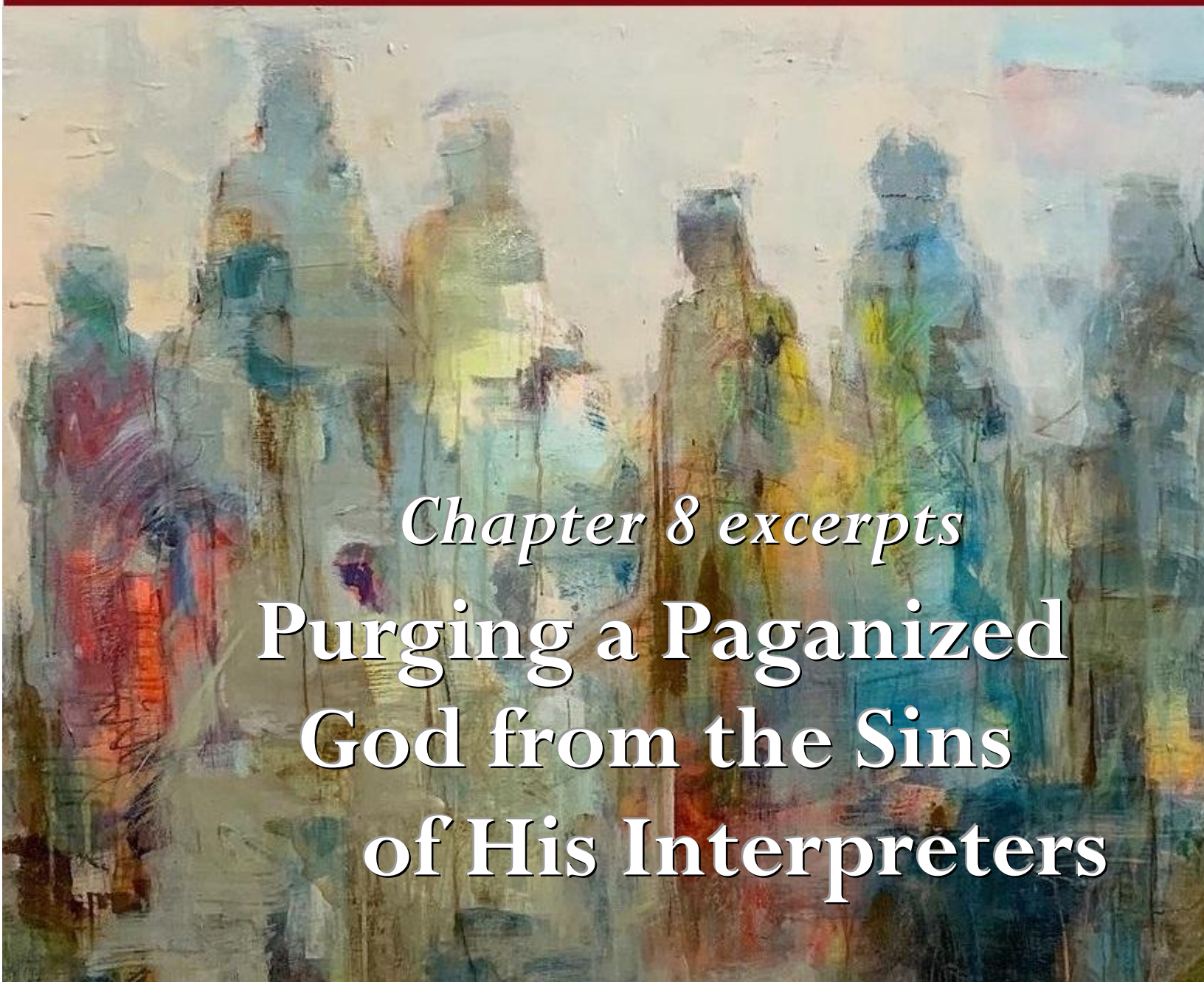


A GOD LIKE No OTHER

Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

An abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. It features several vertical, elongated shapes that suggest human figures or statues, rendered in a palette of muted blues, greens, yellows, and earthy tones. The background is a mix of light and dark washes, creating a sense of depth and atmosphere. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

Chapter 8 excerpts
Purging a Paganized
God from the Sins
of His Interpreters

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Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

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This chapter examines critically the two most common interpretations of the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrificial offerings and rites for sin and purification, namely, the understanding of the sacrifices for sin that is based on the idea of penal substitution and the view that the rites associated with the purification offerings had the purpose of cleansing the sanctuary from the impurities generated by the people's sins so that God might continue to dwell there. Both of these interpretations are grounded in a conception of God that must be regarded as foreign to the Hebrew Bible.

PURGING A PAGANIZED GOD FROM THE SINS OF HIS INTERPRETERS

Among the different types of sacrificial offerings that God had commanded of his people in the Torah were those that were to be presented for the sins they committed. When the people sinned, they were expected to confess and acknowledge their sin, ask forgiveness of God, compensate for any harm they had done to others in order to be reconciled with them, and commit themselves once more to living in accordance with God's commandments. In addition, however, under certain circumstances they were also to offer up sacrifices for sin and participate in sacrificial rites and ceremonies that served as means by which they made manifest their repentance and renewed commitment to observing God's law.

Although the books of Leviticus and Numbers describe in considerable detail the different rites associated with the sacrifices for sin that God was said to have prescribed, they never state clearly the reasons or purpose for which God had commanded for those rites to be carried out. As a result, it has been common for biblical scholars and interpreters to assume that the God of Israel demanded that his people offer him sacrifices for sin for the same basic reason that the gods of the nations demanded sacrificial offerings when human beings had disobeyed and offended them: like those gods, the God of Israel found the sinful behavior of human beings intolerable for his own sake and insisted not only that such behavior come to an end but also that those responsible for it make atonement or reparation for the sins they had committed. They were to do so by compensating him for what they had done, reversing the effects of their actions in some way, or submitting to the punishments that those actions deserved.

According to this understanding of the sacrifices for sin prescribed in the Torah, those sacrifices were not only desirable but also necessary if the God of Israel was to remain present among his people in order to bless and save them. Without those sacrifices, God's holy and righteous nature made it impossible for him to dwell in the midst of sin, injustice, and impurity.

When we examine the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifices for sin on the basis of the concept of God that we have seen throughout the present work, however, it becomes clear that such an understanding of the meaning and purpose of those sacrifices must be regarded as foreign to biblical thought. Rather than being a God who is wholly committed to the happiness

and well-being of the people he loves, a God whose justice, righteousness, and holiness leave him no choice but to demand sacrifices if he is to forgive and accept sinful human beings and dwell in their midst is a God whose nature proves oppressive not only for them but for him as well.

SEEKING FAVOR AND FORGIVENESS FROM THE PAGAN GODS OF ANTIQUITY

In virtually all of the belief systems of antiquity, one of the primary concerns of human beings had to be that of seeking the forgiveness of the gods when one had offended or angered them. The reason for this was that the gods were thought to have power and control over virtually all aspects of human life. They controlled many of the forces of nature on which human beings depended and might strike people, animals, and crops with disease, plague, or drought at any time. They also gave victory and dominance to some peoples and nations while abandoning others to slavery, submission, destruction, and doom. Because they influenced daily life in many other ways as well, their favor was absolutely indispensable if human beings were to enjoy happiness, well-being, and prosperity.

The primary means by which human beings sought forgiveness from the gods, of course, was by presenting them with sacrificial offerings. While some gods might be content with offerings such as fruits and vegetables, drink offerings, or monetary gifts, others demanded animal offerings of different types. Gods such as Molech even demanded the life and blood of human beings, including especially children. These offerings were thought to make reparation to the gods by restoring to them not only any material goods that they had been deprived of but also the honor and respect owed to them. For the gods, it was vital that human beings continue to revere them and hold them in high esteem, since otherwise those human beings would not submit to them as they should or give them what they regarded as being due to them by right. For that reason, the reparations made by those who had angered and offended the gods were viewed as means by which they restored to the gods what was rightfully theirs and indicated their intention to submit obediently to those gods once more in order to give them what they desired and demanded. Furthermore, if one had robbed or deprived the gods of something that was rightfully theirs, it was not enough simply to give back to them what one had taken. One had to pay a penalty as well by giving them an additional amount as reparation or satisfaction for the offense committed.

In many cases, the actions and behaviors that angered and offended the gods had nothing to do with questions of morality but simply involved a failure to give them what they wanted or needed for their own sake. For that reason, as we noted briefly in Chapter 1, it would not be entirely accurate to refer to those actions and behaviors as sins in the biblical sense of the word. Those who disobeyed the gods were undoubtedly committing offenses against them, but strictly speaking they were not transgressing ethical norms

he remained holy in the sense that he had been set apart for God's service. Conversely, people and objects that had not been set apart for God might be in a state of purity or become impure and need to be purified, yet this did not make them holy. Generally, however, anyone or anything that was to be involved in rites or procedures related to the worship of God at the sanctuary dedicated to him was to be both holy and pure at the same time.

According to the biblical prescriptions, some people, objects, and spaces were to be considered more holy than others. Persons such as the priests and Levites were regarded as being holy and consecrated to God in a way that distinguished them from the rest of the Israelites, even though the people of Israel as a whole are repeatedly said to be holy and consecrated to God as well. The Holy Place and Most Holy Place within the sanctuary were, of course, to be regarded as especially holy by those who worshiped Israel's God, yet according to the biblical prescriptions certain areas immediately outside of the sanctuary were also to be marked off as holy. Access to each of the different areas in and around the sanctuary depended on the degree of holiness that the law assigned to particular individuals and groups that formed part of God's people.

FINDING A NEED FOR SACRIFICES FOR SIN

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, whenever people commit any type of sin by disobeying God's commandments or acting contrary to his will, what is said to matter most is that they repent. As we observed in Chapter 5 of this study, in Hebrew the verb *shub* is used to speak of turning *away* from one's wrongdoing and turning *back* to God and his commandments at the same time. What interests God is not merely that people feel remorse for the sins they have committed but that they commit themselves once again to living in conformity with God's will as he has made it known in the Torah and ask God and one another for the assistance and strength they need in order to live out that commitment.

If God's only concern is that his people live in a manner that allows them to attain the well-being he desires for them, then as long as they turn back to him and his commandments whenever they go astray, it might seem that there is no reason why he should demand or require anything else of them. Their renewed commitment to living in accordance with his will should be sufficient to obtain his forgiveness and acceptance, as long as that commitment is firm and sincere, since there is nothing further that God could ask or demand of them that would lead them to conform more fully to his will or enable them to become more obedient to his commandments. All that God can expect of people is that they strive to the best of their abilities to understand and fulfill the commandments he has given them, look to him and one another for the strength, knowledge, and wisdom necessary to obey those commandments properly, and turn back to him any time they slip or fail in their efforts and commitment to follow faithfully the good path he has laid out for them.

If such is the case, however, then it must be asked why God commanded his people to present the offerings for sin that appear in the Torah and to participate in rites that are aimed at their purification and the expiation of their sins. The fact that God gave such commandments to his people suggests that when the people fell into sin, for some reason it was not sufficient for them simply to repent and turn back to him. Clearly he demanded something more, but why?

Biblical scholars and interpreters have traditionally answered this question by positing some type of need on God's part. This need is not absolute in the sense that God's existence depends on it being satisfied or fulfilled. Rather, it exists in relation to human beings and is grounded in his nature. If God is to bless and save human beings, he must act in conformity with the dictates of his nature. In general, biblical scholars and theologians have spoken of three types of needs to which God is subject: the need to be honored, respected, and obeyed, the need to act in conformity with justice and righteousness, and the need to maintain intact his holiness and purity. Supposedly, these needs make it impossible for him to tolerate sin, guilt, injustice, and impurity.

In accordance with this understanding of the needs that are grounded in God's nature, several different answers have been offered to the question of why the God of the Hebrew Bible demands sacrifices for sin in addition to the repentance and renewed commitment to his will of those who sin. On occasion, it is claimed that the sins of human beings deprive God of the honor, respect, glory, and obedience that is due to him by right. In that case, it is not enough for those who have sinned to turn back to him in order to honor, worship, and obey him once more, since they must also restore or pay back to God what they have taken away from him in the past. For that reason, they must make satisfaction to his honor and justice by offering him something to compensate for that which they have wrongfully taken away from him or stolen from him.

Although since the time of Anselm of Canterbury (†1109) this argument has been used to explain why it was necessary for Jesus to suffer and die on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, it is rarely found in the work of biblical scholars who write on the subject of the meaning and purpose of Hebrew sacrifice.¹⁸ Perhaps the main reason for this is that the sacrifices for sin prescribed in the Pentateuch are quite simple and austere. They involve a single animal rather than multiple animals, and in most cases that animal is not a large bull but a goat, a sheep, or even a turtledove or pigeon, all of which are relatively small in comparison. In fact, as noted in Chapter 7, those who were poor might even present a measure of flour as a sin offering. Given the simplicity and austerity of most of these offerings, it is difficult to imagine that those who presented them in biblical times believed that they were restoring

18. On the thought of Anselm regarding the need for human beings to make satisfaction to God's justice and restore to him the honor they have deprived him of through their sin, see David A. Brondos, *Fortress Introduction to Salvation and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 80-85.

to God the honor, respect, and obedience that their sins had deprived him of or stolen from him. In addition, there is nothing in the biblical texts to suggest that the sacrifices for sin commanded by God were thought to make satisfaction to his honor. On the contrary, such medieval and Western categories and modes of thought appear to be foreign to the Hebrew worldview reflected in those texts.

For these reasons, those scholars who have claimed that in biblical thought the need for sacrifices for sin was grounded in God's nature have instead looked to a particular understanding of God's justice or his holiness as a basis for making that claim. Scholars and interpreters who base the need for sacrifices for sin on God's justice have traditionally argued that God's justice and righteousness prevent him from overlooking or ignoring human sin and guilt. Because it would not be just but *unjust* for God to forgive sins freely without punishing them in the way they deserve, God demanded sacrifices for sins as a means by which those who had sinned might be spared from having to endure themselves the punishment that their sins rightly deserved. That punishment or penalty, which was death and the suffering associated with it, was inflicted on an animal victim in their stead. According to this understanding of sacrifices for sin, they involved penal substitution: the life of the animal victims substituted for the life of the offerers, who were spared from the penalty of having to forfeit their own life and endure the suffering that their own death would have entailed by means of their sacrifices.

While proponents of penal substitution views often appeal to a similar understanding of God's holiness to argue that it was not only God's strict justice but also his holiness that demanded punishment for all sins committed, other scholars ground the need for sacrifices for sin in a different understanding of God's holiness. These scholars conceive of God's holiness as an active force or ontological reality that cannot coexist with anything that is unholy, impure, or contaminated. According to these scholars, the sacrifices for sin prescribed in the biblical texts had the purpose of purifying or cleansing people, places, and objects that had become impure or unclean as a result of the sins of those on whose behalf they were offered. As noted above, it is this understanding of the purpose of sacrifices for sin that leads many scholars to prefer to speak of purification offerings rather than sin offerings.

Although there are many similarities between the interpretations of sacrifices for sin that are based on the notion of penal substitution and those that instead revolve around the notion of purification from sin and impurity, the significant differences between these interpretations make it preferable to examine each of them separately. Despite the fact that both of these interpretations ground the need for sin or purification offerings in God's inability to tolerate sin, injustice, and impurity, the manner in which they resolve the problem posed by God's intolerance of human sinfulness distinguishes them clearly from one another.

Temple Jewish thought, sacrificial death and blood were believed to make atonement for sins, put away God's wrath, and obtain his forgiveness. In the mind of many biblical interpreters, sacrifices for sin were therefore the primary means by which it became possible for a righteous and holy God to dwell in the midst of a sinful people without compromising his demand that they be free of sin and perfectly righteous in the same way as he is.

Questioning Punishment and Propitiation

The claim that the purpose of sacrifices for sin was to deliver those who had sinned from the punishment their sins deserved by inflicting that punishment on an animal victim in their place is so problematic from both a biblical and theological standpoint that it is a wonder that there are still biblical scholars who insist on maintaining such a claim. In addition to reading back into the biblical texts ideas that are foreign to them, such an interpretation of the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifices for sin pits God's justice against his love, subjects God to his own nature in a way that makes his nature oppressive not only for human beings but for God himself, and undermines the practice of justice and righteousness rather than promoting it.

According to the logic underlying interpretations of biblical sacrifice that are based on the idea of penal substitution, what concerns God above all else is that the sins committed by human beings receive the punishment they deserve. Only in this way can he uphold justice and satisfy the demands of his just, holy, and righteous nature. This concern takes precedence over every other consideration, including his desire to bless and save human beings. No matter how much he may love human beings and wish for them to be saved, he cannot allow for the sins they commit to be left unpunished. If he is to deliver them from the punishment and condemnation that their sins deserve and his justice demands, therefore, his only option is to provide them with a means by which they can put forward a substitute who will endure that punishment and condemnation in their place. Supposedly, this is the purpose for which he has instituted the sacrifices for sin that are prescribed in his law.

When we examine the biblical texts, however, it becomes clear that the claim that each and every sin deserved punishment, and especially the punishment of death, goes far beyond anything found in those texts in general and the Mosaic law in particular. Among the many actions that are prohibited in that law, only a small handful are said to be punishable by death. The same is true with regard to actions that are mandated as obligatory: in most cases, those who failed to fulfill what was commanded were not sentenced to death. Even those individuals who blatantly rejected God's commandments and refused to submit to them were for the most part simply expelled from the community rather than being put to death.

Conversely, those who did commit acts that were deserving of the penalty of death were not given the option of offering up an animal victim in order to avoid having to endure that penalty themselves. Instead, it was necessary for

the sentence prescribed to be carried out by having them executed in the way that the law stipulated. While in some instances individuals might be spared from a death penalty by paying a price to compensate for the harm that they had caused, especially through their negligence, this did not involve offering up a sacrifice (Exod 21:28-31). Certain commandments explicitly prohibit putting an innocent person to death in the place of a guilty one, and there is no reason to think that the same logic would not have applied to the substitution of an innocent animal for a guilty person as well (Lev 27:29; Num 35:31). Furthermore, nowhere in the biblical texts are people who have committed sins but have failed to offer up a sacrifice for sin ever put to death for that failure, as they would need to be if God's justice required that sins that were not expiated by sacrifice be punished with death. Sacrifices for sin were therefore not means by which people were thought to be spared from being subjected to a penalty or punishment of death for the sins they committed.

For several reasons, the common claim that it was impossible for God to forgive sins without the death and blood of sacrificial victims must also be regarded as contrary to biblical thought. Numerous passages from the Hebrew Bible speak of God forgiving people their sins without offering up any type of sacrifice or demanding bloodshed.²¹ As we have noted above, in fact, according to Lev 5:11-13, those who could not afford to pay for an animal sacrifice could obtain God's forgiveness by offering up a measure of flour as a sin offering. Throughout the biblical texts, the condition that those who have sinned must fulfill in order to be forgiven by God is simply that they repent of their sins and commit themselves anew to living in conformity with his will. Sacrifices for sins were merely a means by which they manifested this repentance and commitment in a concrete and palpable manner. To insist that God demanded that all sins be atoned for by means of a sacrificial offering so as to ensure that no sin was left unpunished is in effect to deny that God ever forgave sins freely.

The idea that sins constantly had to be punished by putting animal victims to death as substitutes for the guilty also requires that some type of equivalence be established between the sins committed and the quantity of sacrifices required to atone for those sins. Thus, for example, if it was truly believed that God's justice demanded that all of the sins that people committed on a daily basis be punished by means of atoning sacrifices, numerous questions would arise for which no answers would be entirely satisfactory: How often did the sacrificial rites aimed at delivering them from that punishment need to be performed? Would not endless sacrifices for sin need to be presented every day and hour in order to make sure that each and every sin that the people committed received its due punishment? And how serious did a sin or a series of sins have to be in order to require the death of a sacrificial victim? Was there a list of more serious sins that needed to be atoned for by sacrifice, in

21. See, for example, Num 11:1-2; 2 Chr 32:24-26; Neh 9:16-17; Ps 32:1-5; 85:1-3; 103:1-5; 130:3-4; Prov 16:6; Isa 27:9; 33:22-24; 55:6-7; Jer 31:31-34; 33:7-8; Dan 4:27; Jonah 3:8-10; Mic 7:18-19.

contrast to lesser sins that did not require a sacrifice? If so, why is there no evidence for any such list in the biblical texts? If the rule was “a life for a life,” as many biblical interpreters claim, would not the death of one sacrificial animal be required for each individual who had sinned, and perhaps for every sin committed by each individual as well? How could the death of a single animal atone for the innumerable sins of large numbers of people? Was there a limit to the number of people whose sins could be atoned for by a single animal? Who could make the determination regarding all of these questions, and on what basis were they to do so?

The prescriptions regarding *Yom Kippur* raise similar problems for this interpretation of biblical sacrifice. If all of the sins that the people had committed over the course of the previous year were taken away by being transferred to the goat for Azazel or scapegoat, why was it necessary for a sin offering for the people’s sins to be presented on that day as well? Were some of the sins of the people taken away by the sin offering and others taken away by the goat? In either case, how could the sins that countless individuals had committed over the course of an entire year be taken away by the sacrifice or death of a single animal? If the punishment that all of those sins deserved was taken away by the *Yom Kippur* rites, why was it also necessary to present sin offerings for the sins that people committed at other moments during the year? Could not those who had sinned simply wait for *Yom Kippur* for their sins to be taken away instead of offering up sacrifices for sin repeatedly over the course of the previous year? If not, why not?

The claim that the idea of propitiating God’s wrath by putting animals to death was central to the biblical understanding of sacrifice is particularly problematic in that it suggests that the people in biblical times believed that God was constantly angry with them because of their sins and therefore needed to be placated continually by the death of one sacrificial animal after another. Sacrificial offerings were acts of love, worship, and adoration by means of which people expressed their devotion to God and their gratitude for his gifts and mercies. Undoubtedly, at times they believed that God was angry with them because of their sins, but this was not the central or dominating concept of the biblical conception of God. Even when they had sinned and offered God sacrifices for sin out of repentance and a desire for a restored relationship with him, those who were truly committed to living in accordance with his will were not simply trying to appease his wrath but to draw near to him in love, confident that in his mercy and grace he would receive them favorably so that they might continue to live in peace and communion with him and rejoice over the blessings that he graciously poured out on them. In fact, not once do the texts in the Pentateuch that prescribe the offering of sacrifice ever speak of those offerings appeasing God’s wrath.

Interpretations of sacrifices for sin that understand their purpose in terms of propitiating God by satisfying the demands of his justice also suggest the mistaken idea that in biblical thought what appeases or exhausts God’s wrath

is simply pouring out or venting that wrath by having an animal victim put to death. If what arouses God's wrath in the first place is behavior that undermines and destroys human well-being, then the only thing that can appease that wrath is that people put away such behavior in order to live in conformity with his loving will. In biblical thought, what God's wrath seeks is not to vent itself until it is exhausted but rather to correct those who insist on practicing destructive behavior. As long as that behavior persists, God's wrath is *not* put away, no matter how much he may pour out that wrath on those who persist in that behavior or how many sacrifices for sin they may offer him. As we have noted previously, in fact, throughout the biblical texts the idea that people can placate God's wrath merely by offering up sacrifices for sin is thoroughly rejected and condemned. What interests God is not sacrifice but the practice of justice, righteousness, love, and solidarity.

A God Held Captive by His Nature

Virtually all biblical scholars recognize that it was not enough to present God with sacrificial offerings or carry out sacrificial rites in order to obtain his favor and forgiveness. Repentance and a renewed commitment to living in accordance with his commandments were also necessary. Among those commandments, of course, were the commandments to offer up sacrifices for sin under certain circumstances and to participate in other rites such as those prescribed for *Yom Kippur*. It was therefore necessary for his people to obey those commandments simply because God had commanded that they do so.

As we have noted above, however, scholars who maintain that sacrifices for sin were necessary in order for those who had sinned to obtain God's forgiveness generally argue that the reason why they were necessary was that repentance and obedience alone were not sufficient to satisfy the demands of God's justice. Supposedly, because God is perfectly just, even when people repent of their sins and strive their best to obey him, they cannot obtain his approval and favor, since nothing less than perfection is acceptable for him. God's justice therefore leaves him no choice but to demand that the sins that human beings inevitably commit receive the punishment due to them. Supposedly, however, God's love for human beings moves him to allow for that punishment to be inflicted on a sacrificial victim in their place.

According to this understanding of the need for sacrifices for sin, therefore, those sacrifices make it possible for sinful human beings to be saved *from God himself and the demands of his justice*. By means of those sacrifices, God's love and mercy save sinners from his righteous wrath and the punishment demanded by his just and holy nature. Strictly speaking, the obstacle that must be overcome in order for those sinners to be saved is not their sinful and destructive behavior per se but rather God's inability to tolerate and overlook that behavior. This is what sacrifices for sin are said to accomplish: they make it possible for God to tolerate and forgive the sinful behavior of human beings without inflicting on them the penalty that their sins deserve.

When God's demand for the death and blood of sacrificial victims is understood on the basis of these ideas, it can be said that he commands that his people present him with sacrificial offerings both for *his* sake and for *theirs*. It is important to grasp clearly, however, the sense in which both of these things are true. Because God can bless and save those who sin only if the demands of his holiness, justice, and righteousness are satisfied by means of the sacrificial rites he has prescribed, God can be said to require sacrifice for *their* sake. His purpose and motive is not to obtain something for himself but to be able to forgive and accept his sinful people without compromising his justice and righteousness. At the same time, however, because God's demand for sacrificial death and blood responds to a need that is found *in him* by virtue of his holy and righteous nature, it can be said that he commands animal sacrifices from his people for *his own* sake. That nature leaves him no choice but to demand sacrificial death and blood if he is to save sinful human beings.

The reason why God must demand sacrifices for sin, therefore, is that *he is subject to his own nature*. This nature defines what he can and cannot do. In that sense, it is not God who defines his nature but his nature that defines him. It imposes certain needs and conditions on God and forces him to act in certain ways while preventing him from acting in others. Although this nature forms part of his being and is inherent to it rather than existing prior to him or independently of him, he must nevertheless obey whatever it dictates in the same way that the pagan gods of antiquity had no choice but to submit to the forces and demands of nature that set limits on them and dictated what was possible and impossible for them. By definition, God cannot do or even desire anything that is incompatible with his just, holy, and righteous nature.

When this understanding of God and God's nature is taken as a starting-point for arguments that posit the necessity of animal sacrifices, those sacrifices are then regarded as responding to a divine need that is similar to the need that the pagan gods of antiquity had for sacrificial offerings. Undoubtedly, unlike many of those pagan gods, the God of Israel was not thought to need sacrificial offerings in order to nourish himself or to continue to exist. If he had need of sacrifices, this need existed only in relation to his desire to save human beings from the punishment and condemnation that his justice demanded on account of their sins. That justice could be satisfied only by means of death, which was the penalty that it dictated for sin. While the God of Israel therefore did not need sacrifices in order to exist, he did have need of the death and blood of sacrificial victims if he was to save sinful human beings from the suffering and death that their sins deserved.

Furthermore, just as the pagan gods of antiquity found it oppressive to be subject to the demands of their own nature, which constantly had to be satisfied if they were to continue to exist, so also the just, holy, and righteous nature of the God of Israel proves oppressive for him due to the demands it makes upon him. In his love, ideally he would like to be free to bless, save, and

forgive sinful human beings without demanding sacrificial death and blood from them. His holy and righteous nature, however, will not allow him that freedom. Instead, his nature holds him captive to its demands by preventing him from relating to human beings in the way that he would like. His love is therefore held captive by his justice and limited by it. Only when the demands of his justice are satisfied through punishment, suffering, and death can he manifest his love for sinful human beings by accepting and receiving them into his favor.

Even when God receives the sacrificial death and blood that his perfect justice demands, however, he still cannot love human beings in the way that he would like. Because he has no choice but to demand that his people give him the sacrifices that will allow him to tolerate and overlook their sins if he is to save and bless them, he must oppress them by continually demanding that they present him with the sacrificial offerings necessary to atone for all of the sins they commit on a daily basis. This demand is extremely costly and onerous for them. A considerable portion of the limited resources that they have for their own support and sustenance must be dedicated to providing God with the animal victims and other offerings that he needs if the demands of his justice are to be satisfied. If it costs his people the death and blood of countless animal victims to make it possible for him to forgive and save them and as a result many among them are forced to endure poverty and hunger, that is the price that both God and the people must pay. His needs must take priority over theirs, since if his need to punish their sins is not satisfied by means of those sacrifices, he will have no alternative but to deny them his forgiveness and inflict on them the punishment and condemnation that their sins deserve. Like the pagan gods of antiquity, God may desire to bless those who draw near to him, yet without their sacrifices that desire must be left unfulfilled. Similarly, while he may not wish to lash out in anger at them in order to punish them for their sins, his holy and righteous nature will not allow for that anger to be placated unless its demands are met by means of the death and blood of sacrificial victims.

In addition to oppressing God by means of the demands it makes on him, then, God's holy and righteous nature also oppresses human beings due to the demands it makes on them as well. They must constantly be carrying out sacrificial rites that require the death and blood of animal victims, since otherwise God's nature will make it necessary for him to punish them for their sins. Try as they might, they cannot avoid sinning, and for that reason they cannot avoid having to offer him the sacrifices he needs in order for them to be delivered from his righteous wrath. If they wish to be acceptable to God and obtain his blessings, they have no choice but to slaughter one animal victim after another continuously in order to carry out the rites that will enable him to look favorably upon them. Their need to provide God with the animal victims and offerings that he needs in order to forgive them their sins is insatiable. Even if they wish to love one another and take care of the needs of

others along with their own, their need to fulfill the demands of God's nature absorbs them. They cannot share with the needy or show kindness and compassion to others in the way that they would like because their time, energy, and resources are limited. They must give priority to God's needs not only over their own needs but over those of others as well.

While in a sense God's demand for sacrificial death and blood is rooted in his love for human beings and his desire to bless them, therefore, ultimately it is not *his love* that leads or obliges him to command sacrificial offerings from them but *his holy and righteous nature*. That nature stands *in opposition to his love* and constitutes an *obstacle* or *impediment* to it. For the same reason, his love for his people can never be unconditional. On the contrary, he cannot express his love for his people unless the conditions that are rooted in his holy and righteous nature are first met. This must be his primary concern. He must ensure that his *own* need for the sins of the people to receive the punishment that is due to them is satisfied before he can satisfy the needs of his people, since it is impossible for him to disregard or dismiss the demands made upon him by his perfect justice, righteousness, and holiness.

By maintaining that God's primary concern must be for himself and the demands of his own nature, which take priority over the needs of the human beings he wishes to save and bless, interpretations of sacrifice that are based on the idea of penal substitution make the God of Israel similar to the pagan gods of antiquity in another way as well. What those gods desired above all else was to dwell unmolested in peace so as to be able to enjoy a blissful existence. For that reason, they simply wished to be served by human beings while at the same time demanding that those human beings avoid any actions that might upset, bother, or irritate them. In a similar manner, what the God of Israel is thought to desire is that his people do all that he commands so that he may be undisturbed and at peace in his heavenly abode or his earthly dwelling at his sanctuary. If he demands that they practice justice and righteousness, it is not so much for *their* sake as it is for *his*, because the practice of sin, injustice, and unrighteousness bothers and upsets him. Like the god Apsu in the *Enuma Elish*, he cannot help but become angry if the activities and behavior that he finds disagreeable prevent him from being content and at peace. It is for that same reason that he commands sacrifices for sin, which serve to cover up or remove sin and guilt from his sight and assuage his righteous wrath.

According to this understanding of God, both the obedience that he commands of human beings as well as the sacrifices that he requires from them when they fail to obey him are ultimately rooted in a concern for himself. Once again, what matters to him is not the effect that their obedience or disobedience to his commandments has *on them* but rather the effect that it has *on him*, whether directly or indirectly. For the same reason, what moves him to command that they offer sacrifices to him when they sin against him is the manner in which their fulfillment of that command or their failure to

fulfill it affects *him*. Those sacrifices are designed not to make the people more obedient to his commandments or bring them into greater conformity with his will but to satisfy the demands of his holy and righteous nature.

Substituting Sacrifice for Obedience

One of the arguments commonly employed by those who defend interpretations of sacrifice that are based on the idea of penal substitution is that if God left human sins unpunished, he would be giving human beings license to sin. Supposedly, if people were allowed to sin freely and not threatened with punishment, they would have no reason to obey God and submit to his will. For that reason, by demanding that those who sin present sacrifices in order to be spared the punishment that their sins deserve, God dissuades them from sinning by making it clear to them that their sinful behavior will have consequences and that they will have to pay a price when they fail to obey what he has commanded.

The idea that God's nature demands perfection, however, ultimately undermines such an argument. In reality, it is pointless for people to strive to avoid God's punishments by obeying him, since it will never be possible for them to attain the perfect obedience he demands. They will always fall short of perfection and as a result will always be liable to his punishments. The only way in which they can avoid those punishments is not by doing their best to obey his commandments but by putting animals to death and shedding their blood in order to carry out the sacrificial rites God has prescribed so that the demands of his justice and holiness may be satisfied and his righteous wrath may be appeased.

By allowing his people to substitute sacrifice for obedience, therefore, God frees them from the necessity of having to obey his commandments, except of course the commandment to offer up sacrifices whenever they sin. What ultimately interests God is not that people practice justice and righteousness but that they satisfy the demands of his holy and righteous nature by presenting him with sacrificial offerings to atone for their inevitable *failure* to practice justice and righteousness. When they fall into sinful behavior, what God's justice requires is *not* that they put away that sinful behavior so as thereby to become pure in their conduct once more but rather that they slaughter animal victims and present him with the blood of those victims. God demands sacrificial offerings not because they promote the well-being of human beings by bringing them to live in justice, righteousness, and love but only because he cannot tolerate their sinfulness and impurity without those offerings.

For these reasons, it is futile not only for human beings to attempt to live in justice, love, and righteousness but also for God to demand such a life of them. In the end, what will obtain God's favor and acceptance is not their manner of life but the sacrificial offerings that they will present to him. Rather than leading human beings to put away the sinful way of life that makes them

unacceptable to him, therefore, God's demand for sacrificial offerings does the opposite: it allows them to continue freely in their sinful behavior and simply to make use of sacrificial death and blood to cover up or remove that behavior from his sight in order to avoid the punishments that his justice would otherwise demand for that behavior. Their efforts must therefore be aimed, not at putting an end to their sinful ways so as no longer to endure the harmful consequences of their sins, but at appeasing God through sacrifices and acts of atonement so that he is no longer angry at them and no longer insists on punishing them. If by means of the death of sacrificial victims they can bring God to withhold punishment for their sins, they can have assurance of salvation even if they continue in those sins, since it is not those sins themselves that do them harm but rather the fact that God's justice demands punishment for those sins. There is thus no need for them to be overly concerned about the sins they commit or fear any type of punishment for those sins, since as long as they offer up sacrifices for those sins, God will simply overlook them.

Instead of communicating to human beings that God does not and will not tolerate sin, then, interpretations of sacrifice that are based on the idea of penal substitution lead them to conclude that God *can* and *will* tolerate their sin and leave it unpunished as long as they give him the offerings he desires and demands. Likewise, instead of bringing them to seek to *avoid* sin, the idea that they can atone for their sins through sacrifice can be seen as giving them license to sin. In principle, they might even conclude that they can sin deliberately and then offer up a sacrifice for sin to avoid facing any type of punishment or consequence for their sin.

Of course, biblical scholars and interpreters generally insist that it was not acceptable for people to sin deliberately with the idea that after they had sinned they could simply offer up a sacrifice to atone for their sin and be restored to God's favor. Those who took such an approach to sacrificial offerings were not thought to obtain God's forgiveness but were instead believed to arouse his wrath. Only those who sought to avoid sin and were truly repentant for any sins that they had committed could make atonement for their sins by means of sacrificial offerings and receive forgiveness from God.

In reality, however, once it is claimed that any and all sins committed could be expiated and obtain God's forgiveness by means of sacrificial offerings, then this must be said with regard to sins that were committed deliberately as well, as long as those guilty of those sins repented of them. To affirm otherwise would mean that certain sins could never be forgiven or expiated under any circumstances. Once again, however, if forgiveness ultimately depended on repentance, then it is not clear why sacrifices for sin were also necessary. In any case, as long as their repentance was sincere, those who had sinned deliberately could always satisfy the demands of God's justice by means of more atoning sacrifices that would free them from the punishment which their behavior deserved, no matter how often they fell into such sins.

Trying to Make Sacrifice Work

The recognition that in biblical thought sincere repentance and a renewed commitment to obeying God's commandments were necessary to obtain God's favor and forgiveness has led most biblical scholars and interpreters to insist that sacrifices were not thought to atone for sins automatically. Many of these scholars and interpreters speak of sacrificial rites making atonement by means of some type of *modus operandi* or "mechanics." Thus, for example, Milgrom alludes explicitly to "the *modus operandi* of the *ḥaṭṭā't*" and the "mechanism of the purgation" involved in the purification offerings,²² while Stephen Finlan refers to the scapegoat as "a sin-bearing mechanism" and affirms that the sacrificial rites were thought to involve "an impersonal atoning mechanism" that worked on its own independently of any divine intervention.²³

According to this manner of understanding the sacrificial rites, when those rites were performed in the way that God had commanded, they "worked" to produce their salvific "effects," atoning for sin and obtaining God's forgiveness and acceptance. Biblical interpreters who look to the idea of penal substitution to interpret sacrifices for sin generally posit a *modus operandi* that is fairly simple and straightforward. Following the transfer of the sin and guilt of the offerers to the animal they brought for sacrifice as their substitute, the animal was put to death and its blood was presented before God. Once this had taken place, the fact that in his law God had made the promise and commitment to grant forgiveness to any who offered up a sacrifice for sin in that manner with a sincere heart meant that they could have full assurance that as a result of that rite God's forgiveness and favor were theirs once again.

Such an understanding of sacrifice, however, raises multiple problems. If God had imbued the sacrificial offerings and rites with the power to obtain his forgiveness and acceptance, then the people were to seek these things not from God directly or by means of a life lived in accordance with God's will but by slaughtering animals and presenting their blood to God in the way he had commanded. They would be led to place their trust and confidence not in God himself but in the rites to which he had irreversibly attached his promises of blessing. Any assurance of forgiveness that they might have would come from the belief that those rites had "worked" to atone for their sins because they had been carried out properly in accordance with God's command.

Of course, in order to have such assurance, they would need to be certain that those rites had in fact been carried out in the way that God had commanded. For different reasons, however, it would be difficult for them to attain such certainty. Thus, for example, among the requirements that God had laid down for sacrificial offerings to be acceptable was that the animals

22. See Jacob Milgrom, "The *Modus Operandi* of the *ḥaṭṭā't*: A Rejoinder," *JBL* 109 (1990): 111-17 (113); *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology*, SJLA 36 (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 87.

23. Stephen Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, AcBib 19 (Atlanta: SBL, 2004), 42, 81.

chosen for sacrifice be free from any blemish or defect.²⁴ If people offered up an animal that they initially believed to be without any type of blemish but later discovered on its carcass a small blemish that had escaped their view, they would have to conclude that the offering had actually been unacceptable to God and had not actually “worked” to obtain his forgiveness due to that blemish. In fact, it was even possible that they might fail to discover the small blemish it had and mistakenly believe that the sacrifice had worked to make atonement for their sins when such was not actually the case because of the blemish. Similarly, if the priest was not in a state of purity in the way that the law prescribed when he performed the rites on behalf of the offerers and the offerers were unaware of the priest’s impurity, they might believe that the rite had been properly carried out when such was not actually the case. The priest himself might not even realize that he had acquired some type of impurity and thus had not performed the rite in accordance with the law. In these cases, God’s forgiveness would need to be denied to the offerers and they would continue to be subject to his wrath and punishments. Rather than having full assurance that the sacrificial rites in which they had participated had made atonement for their sins, therefore, the offerers might always be left with lingering doubts as to whether every aspect of the rite had been performed precisely in the way that God had commanded.

The idea that the sacrificial offerings and rites did not obtain forgiveness automatically but only restored the offerers to God’s favor when they were truly repentant of their sins would also have undermined any assurance of forgiveness on the part of the offerers. Even if God had conferred some power on the rites he had prescribed, ultimately what would determine whether he would forgive and accept the people once more was not the performance of the rite but that which he saw when he looked into their hearts. Unless they could be certain that their hearts were sufficiently pure and free from sin to obtain God’s approval, they could never know whether or not those rites had produced the effect they desired. Because the determining factor was not the performance of the rite but the spirit of repentance and obedience in which it was to be carried out, in fact, the rite itself would become superfluous, unless of course it is claimed that God could not and would not forgive those who repented and renewed their commitment to obey him unless they also carried out the sacrificial rites he had prescribed. Such a claim, however, would raise once more the question of why God had found it necessary to prescribe those rites and whether he had done so for his own sake or that of the people themselves.

The notion that repentance was necessary in order for sacrifices for sin to work in order to obtain God’s forgiveness would therefore raise other questions as well. How sincere did that repentance need to be in order for the sacrifice to effect atonement? Would not God have to make some determination or judgment as to whether that repentance was sufficiently sincere

24. See, for example, Lev 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:23, 28, 32; 5:15, 18; 6:6; Num 6:14.

and profound to make atonement by means of the sacrifices presented? If so, then forgiveness would depend, not on the sacrifice or the rite, but on that which God saw when he looked into the hearts of the offerers. If God had to determine whether their repentance was sufficient to satisfy his demands, those who presented sacrifices for sin could never be sure whether or not their sacrifice had actually secured God's forgiveness and made atonement.

This problem is compounded even further in the case of sacrifices for sin offered for more than one person, such as the sin offering presented for the sins of the entire people on *Yom Kippur*. If repentance was necessary for the sin offering on that day to attain God's forgiveness but many of the people were not sufficiently repentant for their sins, did the sin offering obtain forgiveness only for the portion of people that were truly repentant? If so, did the people who were not sufficiently repentant remain liable to the punishment that their sins deserved? Or did God instead forgive the people as a whole for their sins if a sufficient portion of them were repentant? If so, what percentage of the people had to be truly repentant in order for the *Yom Kippur* rites to take away the people's sins? Was fifty or fifty-one percent sufficient, or was the number higher? How could anyone ever know? Did the sins for which people were not truly repentant actually get placed on the scapegoat when the high priest laid his hands on the goat to transfer sins to it? If the sins of the unrepentant were not taken away by the rite, what happened to those sins? Did they remain on the priest who had supposedly taken up all of the sins committed by the people as a whole when he confessed those sins over the goat or did they instead revert back to the unrepentant individuals who had committed them? On what basis could any of these questions be answered?

These observations also make it clear why it is problematic to maintain that God had promised to grant forgiveness whenever the rites were carried out properly. If that were the case, then God had placed himself under the obligation to forgive the people their sins when they presented him with the sacrifices for sin that he had prescribed. In essence, he had given the people and the rites some power over himself that he now had no choice but to respect and had established a system in which people could simply purchase his forgiveness by means of an offering. The idea that sacrifices for sin were ransom payments made to God in exchange for his favor and forgiveness is based on this same type of logic. What people sought and obtained by means of their sacrifices was deliverance from his wrath and punishments. Supposedly, once their sacrifices had appeased his wrath and satisfied his demand for punishment, those who had sinned could enjoy peace and no longer be fearful of divine punishment, no matter how much damage their sins had done to themselves or others. They could also attain salvation independently of the manner in which they lived or behaved, since their salvation was not thought to result intrinsically from their conduct but was instead said to be brought about by God alone, simply by leaving their sins unpunished.

Such a view of salvation can hardly be regarded as representing faithfully biblical thought. Instead, it is essentially pagan in nature, since it merely involves being spared from the wrath of the deity. The plight that human beings face is not that their sinful behavior destroys their happiness and well-being but that it arouses God's anger, condemnation, and judgment. In contrast, in the Hebrew Bible salvation involves being made whole and experiencing well-being both individually and collectively. That wholeness and well-being can be attained only by means of a life in accordance with God's will. Such a life is not brought about merely by being spared from God's punishments. On the contrary, the belief that as a result of a person's sacrifice that person is no longer subject to punishment for the sins that he or she has committed may lead people to sin even more, confident that their sin will not be taken into account.

Of course, it is commonly maintained that those who have received God's forgiveness should strive to live in conformity with his will out of gratitude for that forgiveness. In reality, however, they are under no obligation to do so. To affirm the contrary would be to claim that the sacrifice for sin that they presented in accordance with God's command was *not* truly effective and thus did *not* actually make atonement for their sins, since they must still obtain God's forgiveness and atone for their sins by means of their obedience to his commandments. The idea that one should obey God out of gratitude also implies that God wants obedience from human beings for *his* sake rather than theirs. In that case, what should motivate human beings to live in accordance with God's will is once more the effect that their actions will have, not on them directly, but *on God*. Conversely, what should lead them to avoid sinful behavior is not that such behavior will do them harm and undermine their wholeness and well-being but simply that it is not pleasing to God. Whatever negative consequences their sin may have do not follow intrinsically from that sin itself but instead are the result of God's wrath and punishments.

The claim that sacrificial offerings and rites were thought to work by means of some type of *modus operandi* or mechanics not only leads to an understanding of salvation that is foreign to biblical thought but also runs contrary to the idea of justice that runs throughout the biblical texts. As we have seen in Chapter 4 of this study, justice was not thought to be achieved merely by meting out punishments on those who were guilty of sin. In the Hebrew Bible, justice can be said to exist only when all enjoy wholeness and well-being. For that reason, the notion that God's justice could be satisfied simply by inflicting punishments on those who had sinned or on the animal victims that they presented as their substitutes cannot be regarded as reflecting faithfully biblical thought.

In fact, critics of penal substitution views of sacrifice have often pointed out that the idea of substitutionary punishment in itself represents a denial of justice in that it involves subjecting an innocent victim to a punishment which that victim does not deserve in order to let the guilty who actually do

deserve to be punished go free. In that way, justice is supposedly satisfied by an *injustice*. The conception of God associated with such an idea is problematic for the same reason. Rather than taking care to ensure that those who are guilty of sin receive the punishment they deserve, God is simply concerned that their sin not be left unpunished for his own sake. It does not matter to him whether those who are made to endure the punishment that his justice requires are those who have actually sinned or not, as long as that punishment is carried out. Ultimately, what concerns him is not justice but the need for the demands of his nature to be satisfied.

Similarly, once God's wrath at sin is said to be taken away by the death or blood of sacrificial offerings, that wrath ceases to be an expression of love and concern for human beings and instead is rooted in a concern for God's own self. Like the pagan gods of antiquity, what interests him is merely venting his wrath by inflicting punishment for the sins that have been committed in order that his demand for retribution may be satisfied. He does not care if that wrath is poured out on the persons who are guilty themselves or on an animal victim in their place, as long as someone or something is made to endure the punishment of suffering and death that his justice requires. Once that punishment has been inflicted, he can be at peace with himself and his justice once more, at least until the sins of human beings begin to arouse his wrath once again. When that happens, however, the solution is always the same: to slaughter another animal victim to provide him with the blood he needs to satisfy the demands of his justice. As long as sinful human beings continue to do that, in principle they can live in peace and do whatever they desire. While it may be advantageous to them to turn away from their sins and stop offending God by their behavior, since that will delay the onset of his wrath as well as the need to offer up an atoning sacrifice, in reality they can commit sin and injustice freely as long as they are willing to offer up sacrifices more frequently and tell God that they sincerely repent of what they have done.

Reconsidering Atonement as a Biblical Concept

Once it is recognized that it was not the death or blood of sacrificial victims that obtained God's forgiveness or appeased his wrath at sin but the commitment to turn away from one's sin and return to the way of life that God commanded for the good of all, the idea that those who had sinned were thought to make atonement for their sins by means of the sacrificial offerings and rites prescribed in the Torah must be called into question. Such an idea implies that what interested God was that those who had sinned make amends for their sin or compensate in some way for their wrongdoing.

To affirm that the suffering and death of sacrificial victims or the rites performed with their blood made atonement for sins is to maintain that what satisfies God's justice, puts away his wrath, and obtains his forgiveness is *something other* than the practice of what is good, right, and just. Rather

than demanding such behavior of those who have sinned, God accepts a sacrifice *in the place* of that behavior. Their sacrifice compensates for their failure to obey God, in effect constituting a payment to him for their disobedience to his will. While initially God demanded obedience, he puts away that demand in order to accept a sacrifice instead. In that case, what interests God is not that people practice justice and righteousness but that they present him with something that will make amends for their *failure* to practice justice and righteousness.

The language of atonement also conveys the idea that what God or God's justice demands is that people perform some act that will restore to him something that is rightfully his or make reparation to him for having offended him or disobeyed his law. The purpose is to make amends *for the past*. What interested the God of the Hebrew Bible, however, was not that people do something to compensate or make amends for past actions or offer him something as payment and reparation for having sinned against him, but that his people commit themselves anew to living in accordance with his loving will in the *present* and the *future*. This commitment was something that God desired, not for *his own sake* or for the sake of his honor and justice, but for *their sake*. While under certain circumstances those who had wronged others were required to make reparation to them, generally by means of a monetary payment, that reparation was not an atoning sacrifice or sacrificial offering made to God but simply a means by which the harm that they had caused to others might be undone or mitigated to the extent that this was possible. God's forgiveness and acceptance could not be bought.

Although in principle it might be said that repentance atoned for sins, such an affirmation can be misleading if it is understood in the sense that it compensated for the wrongs that one had committed or made amends for one's sins. Repentance was not something that people offered up to God in exchange for his forgiveness. If God demanded that those who had sinned turn away from their sin and turn back to him in obedience, it was not because he wanted them to make up for what they had done but because only in that way could they attain the well-being that resulted from putting away behavior that did them harm.

In biblical thought, therefore, those who offered God sacrifices for sins were not seeking to atone for their sins. They did not think that putting an animal victim to death or presenting sacrificial blood to God made satisfaction or restitution to God for having violated his law. Unlike the gods of the nations, the God of Israel had no interest in receiving offerings or acts of worship in themselves. He was not demanding compensation or reparation for actions that people had committed in opposition to his will or seeking to regain something that they had wrongfully taken from him. For that reason, neither sacrificial offerings nor the death of animal victims were thought to make atonement for sins. The notion that one had to atone for one's sins by suffering, death, or sacrifice instead reflects a way of thinking that was

associated with the pagan gods of antiquity, who merely wanted to make those who had offended and angered them pay for what they had done.

For the same reasons, the language of expiation and propitiation can also convey ideas that do not reflect faithfully biblical thought. Strictly speaking, sacrificial offerings did not expiate sins or propitiate God's wrath. They simply served as means by which people manifested to God their sincere repentance as well as their intention to return to a life of obedience to his commandments. This was the only thing that could bring God to forgive them their wrongdoing and put away his wrath at the destructive behavior into which they had fallen, precisely because it was the only means by which they could attain the well-being that he desired for them out of love for them.

As long as people remained committed to living in accordance with his will, therefore, there was nothing that prevented God from forgiving their sins freely. No type of atonement, propitiation, expiation, or ransom was necessary. Of course, because the people's obedience to his will was always imperfect and it was impossible for them to live without sin, God had to remain active among them constantly to correct and discipline them through various means so as to bring them into greater conformity with his will. If they responded to this activity in the way that he desired, however, he simply overlooked their past sins, since they were fulfilling the demands of his justice to the best of their abilities for their own good. That was all that God could ask or expect of them. As we have seen in the previous chapter and will see in greater detail in the next chapter as well, while God did command sacrifices of those who had sinned, the sole purpose of those sacrifices was to strengthen their commitment to the way of life he had laid out for them in his love and to bring about in them a greater conformity to his will for the good of all.

SATISFYING THE NEED OF A HOLY GOD FOR PURITY

In contrast to those scholars who have argued that the God of Israel was thought to have prescribed the offering of sacrifices for sin in order to satisfy the demands of his justice, many scholars have claimed that the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifices for sin are grounded instead in a concern for God's holiness. According to these scholars, actions and behaviors that ran contrary to God's will were believed to generate some type of impure substance or force that God was unable to tolerate due to his holiness and purity. This impure substance or force was said to adhere either to human beings themselves or to the sanctuary and the sacred objects associated with it. While some scholars have argued that this substance or force had to be eliminated by being transferred to an animal victim that was then put to death, others insist that its elimination was brought about through contact with the blood of sacrificial animals. According to this view, sacrificial blood was believed to possess the power to absorb or neutralize the impure substance or force generated by human sins. When applied to the people, places, or objects that had been contaminated with that substance or force as a result of the sins

committed by human beings, they became clean and pure and thus acceptable to God once more.

It is this type of interpretation regarding the manner in which the sacrificial offerings and rites prescribed in the Torah effected purification that is especially associated with Jacob Milgrom. While Milgrom's reading of the biblical texts was grounded in his Jewish tradition, many of the assumptions that are evident in his work are commonly found in the writings of Christian biblical interpreters as well.

Pollution, Purification, and the Power of Sacrificial Blood

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the idea that people become unclean or impure as a result of the sins they commit is fairly common. Although the passages that speak in these terms can be understood purely in a figurative or metaphorical sense, many biblical scholars have argued that sinful behavior was thought to make people unclean or impure in a literal sense as well. In some mysterious manner, the sins that people committed were transformed into some type of invisible and pernicious substance or force that could affect them adversely if they did not take action to rid themselves of that substance or force in some way. As we have noted above, it is common to claim that when those who presented an animal victim as a sacrifice for sin laid their hands upon the animal, they were thought to be transferring that substance or force to the animal in the same way that the high priest was said to lay the sins and transgressions of the people upon the goat for *Azazel* on *Yom Kippur*. According to this understanding of the offerings for sin, when the sacrificial victim was slaughtered and its remains were burned on the altar, those who had sinned were cleansed from the impurity that their sins had generated, delivered from the harmful consequences of those sins and the punishment that they deserved, and restored to God's favor.

Although the same basic understanding of sin and impurity runs throughout the work of Milgrom, the manner in which he conceives of that sin and impurity affecting those who had violated God's commandments is very different. Rather than seeing the purpose of the sin or purification offerings in terms of ridding human beings themselves from the impurity or pollution that resulted from their sins, Milgrom argued that those offerings were intended to purify the sanctuary in which Israel's God was believed to dwell. According to Milgrom, the prescriptions regarding sin and sacrifice in the book of Leviticus establish a distinction between two categories of commandments, "performative and prohibitive," that is, "dos and don'ts": "The performative commandments are violated by refraining from or neglecting to do them," in contrast to the prohibitive commandments, which are violated by performing deeds and actions that God has forbidden. While the violation of performative commandments or sins of omission affect the sinner, they carry "no impact upon his environment." Any violation of the prohibitive commandments, however, "sets up reverberations that upset the

divine ecology” and “generates impurity, which impinges upon God’s sanctuary and land.”²⁵

Milgrom argues that this impurity was conceived of as an actual substance that traveled through the air in order to adhere to the sanctuary and some of the sacred objects found there, that is, the “sancta”: “for both Israel and her neighbors impurity was a physical substance, an aerial miasma that possessed magnetic attraction for the realm of the sacred.”²⁶ This substance possessed a “dynamic and malefic power” and polluted different areas of the sanctuary in three stages. The courtyard altar was polluted by the impurity generated by an individual’s inadvertent sin, the shrine and its inner altar were polluted by the inadvertent sin of the high priest or the community as a whole, and all of these places together with the adytum or Most Holy Place were polluted by “wanton unrepented sin.” According to Milgrom, in this way “the severity of the sin or impurity varies in direct relation to the depth of its penetration into the sanctuary.”²⁷ The impurity caused by more serious sins “is powerful enough to penetrate into the shrine and adytum” and is “dangerously contagious.”²⁸ The biblical texts “are grounded in the axiom, common to all ancient Near Eastern culture, that impurity is the implacable foe of holiness wherever it exists; it assaults the sacred realm even from afar.”²⁹ The book of Leviticus thus “propounds a notion of impurity as a dynamic force, magnetic and malefic to the sphere of the sacred, attacking it not just by direct contact but from a distance.”³⁰

Milgrom maintained that if the pollution and impurity generated by these various types of sin was allowed to accumulate, eventually it became intolerable for God, who was thought to dwell in the sanctuary. Because “the impure and the holy are mutually antagonistic and irreconcilable,” when that happens God’s holiness will lead him to abandon the polluted sanctuary, thereby depriving his people of his presence there as well as the blessings associated with that presence.³¹ In Milgrom’s words, “the God of Israel will not abide in a polluted sanctuary. The merciful God will tolerate a modicum of pollution. But there is a point of no return. If the pollution continues to accumulate, the end is inexorable: ‘Then the cherubs raised their wings’ (Ezek 11:22). The divine chariot flies heavenward, and the sanctuary is left to its doom.”³² Milgrom uses the analogy of electromagnetism to explain what happens when impurity builds up in the sanctuary: “the contracted impurity, be it even so slight at the outset, will grow in force until it has the power to pollute the sanctuary from afar. . . . Let electromagnetism serve, *mutatis mutanda*, as

25. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 229; cf. 1055.

26. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 257.

27. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 257.

28. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 263.

29. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 257.

30. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 257.

31. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 261.

32. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 258.

an illustrative analogy. The minus charge of impurity is attracted to the plus charge of the sanctuary, and if the former builds up enough force to spark the gap, then lightninglike it will strike the sanctuary.”³³ For Milgrom, the incompatibility of God’s holiness and the pollution caused by human sin and impurity not only places human beings at risk but God himself. In the priestly writings, “impurity is virulent, dangerous to humans and God alike. However, the threat to God is not from nonexistent demons but from humans who willfully or inadvertently violate the divine commandments and ultimately drive YHWH out of the sanctuary.”³⁴

According to Milgrom’s interpretation of the biblical texts, the solution to this problem is provided by the blood of the *ḥaṭṭā’t*, that is, the sin or purification offering. Once the blood of the animal victim has been extracted from it and has been consecrated by being sprinkled toward the altar, it can then function as a “purging element” or “ritual detergent.”³⁵ The impurities generated by the sins of the people and the priests are “absorbed by the blood detergent” when the blood is applied to the surfaces to which those impurities have adhered.³⁶ Milgrom explains: “By daubing the altar with the *ḥaṭṭā’t* blood or by bringing it inside the sanctuary (e.g., 16:14-19), the priest purges the most sacred objects and areas of the sanctuary on behalf of the person who caused their contamination by his physical impurity or inadvertent offense.”³⁷ Because the people continually sin, it is necessary to carry out the purification of the sanctuary periodically: “it is the continuous pollution of the sanctuary by Israel’s moral and physical impurity that mandates its indispensable purification by means of the *ḥaṭṭā’t* offering.”³⁸

Once a year, however, it is necessary to purge the innermost part of the sanctuary as well as the sancta on *Yom Kippur*. This is the only day of the year that the high priest enters into the Most Holy Place to purge the *kapporet*, “the very seat of the Godhead,” from the impurity that has polluted it.³⁹ He does this by sprinkling the blood of the bull he has offered up as a purification offering for himself on and in front of the *kapporet* (Lev 16:14). Once the blood of the purification offerings for the high priest and the people has cleansed the holy places and objects associated with the sanctuary from the impurity that has accumulated there over the previous year, the people can rest assured that God will continue to dwell in their midst in order to bless them. “God would continue to reside with Israel because his temple and people were once again pure.”⁴⁰

According to Milgrom, the rite performed with the goat for Azazel on *Yom Kippur* in Leviticus 16 is also related to the purification of the sanctuary

33. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 271.

34. Jacob Milgrom, “Impurity is Miasma: A Critical Response to Hiram Maccoby,” *JBL* 119 (2000): 729-46 (730).

35. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 254.

36. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1036.

37. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 256.

38. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1052.

39. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1034.

40. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 51.

Protecting Israel's God from the Perils of Pollution

Although the claim that the God of Israel was thought to have prescribed the sacrificial offerings and rites for sin that appear in the Pentateuch out of a concern for his holiness is problematic for a number of reasons, the most serious difficulty raised by such a claim has to do with the concept of God associated with it. Like the interpretations of the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifices for sin that regard those sacrifices as means by which God sought to satisfy the demands of his justice, interpretations of the sacrificial offerings and rites prescribed for sin that are based on the idea that God's holiness will not allow him to tolerate the impurity generated by the sins of his people ground the need for those offerings and rites in God's concern for himself and the demands of his nature. While he undoubtedly commands that his people present him with those offerings and carry out those rites because he wishes to bless, forgive, and save them, ultimately he demands these things for *his own* sake, since the problem that must be resolved is not their sin and impurity per se but rather his inability to *tolerate* that sin and impurity.

According to the views of Milgrom and other scholars whose work reflects the same ideas, the primary purpose of the purification offerings and rites with blood that God had prescribed in the Torah was that of maintaining the sanctuary clean and pure so that God would not abandon it. Such an understanding of those offerings and rites is based on several assumptions that are highly questionable not only because they appear to have no biblical basis but also due to the theological and conceptual difficulties they raise.

The first of these assumptions is that, in order for God to bless people, he must dwell in their midst and be in close proximity to them. While such an idea was common in the pagan worldviews of antiquity, it can hardly be considered to reflect faithfully the conception of God found in the biblical texts. The God of the Hebrew Bible is present throughout his creation and is free to act at any time and in any place that he desires. Although in a sense he was thought to make himself present at his sanctuary, by no means were his presence and activity thought to be confined there. In the prayer attributed to Solomon at the dedication of the temple, he speaks repeatedly of heaven as the place where God dwells and states no less than eight times that it is from heaven that God will hear the people's prayers (1 Kgs 8:22-54; 2 Chr 6:12-42; cf. 7:14). In 2 Chr 7:1, the fire that is said to consume the offerings after Solomon finishes his prayer is also said to come from heaven rather than from somewhere inside the temple. As we have seen in the previous chapter, throughout the biblical writings it is common to speak of God making his name dwell at the temple to communicate the idea that he made himself present there without denying that at the same time he remained present both in heaven and throughout the earth. Many other passages from the Hebrew Bible also speak of God hearing, speaking, and acting from heaven.⁶⁷

67. See, for example, Exod 16:4; 20:22; Deut 4:36; 26:15; Josh 10:11; 2 Sam 22:14; 2 Kgs 1:10-14; 1 Chr 21:26; Neh 9:13-15, 27-28; Job 1:16; Ps 57:3; 102:18-20.

A second assumption closely related to the first is that God's presence in the midst of his people guarantees his blessing. For reasons we have seen repeatedly, people can be blessed only if they live in the way that God has commanded for their own good. If they instead live in ways that undermine and destroy their well-being, God cannot bless them, no matter how near he is to them. He must first seek to correct and purify them, and for him to do so often involves "visiting" them in the sense of punishing and chastising them in order to accomplish that objective. In the biblical texts, in fact, God's presence among the people is often said to depend on their living in accordance with his will. In that case, the idea is not so much that God's presence brings blessing but rather that obedience to God's will brings both his loving presence as well as his blessing. Of course, even when God acts to correct and chastise people through punishments, it can be said that he is at the same time acting to bless them in the sense of attempting to bring about in them the way of life that will make it possible for them to enjoy the well-being he desires for them. Thus, while in a sense it can be said that God's presence always brings blessing, this blessing may at times take the form of chastisements and punishments. At the same time, God can bless his people from afar just as easily as he can when he is near to them.

A third assumption reflected in the idea that the purpose of the sacrificial offerings and rites prescribed for sin was to enable a holy God to dwell in the midst of a sinful people is that what mattered to God was not the sinful behavior of the people in itself nor the harmful effect which that behavior had *on them*, but rather the impure substance or force that their sins generated and the manner in which that substance or force affected *him*. This assumption may be considered the most problematic of all. Strictly speaking, what God is said to find impossible to tolerate due to his holiness and purity is not the practice of sin and injustice among his people but rather the *impurity* or *pollution* that is generated by that sin and injustice. According to this logic, rather than demanding that his people put a stop to their sin and injustice, what interests God is that they keep his sanctuary clean so that he may dwell there unmolested.

This is the logic reflected in Milgrom's work. What ultimately concerns God is not that people refrain from destructive behaviors that do them and others harm but that they carry out the rites that he has ordained in order to rid his sanctuary of the impurity generated by their sins. The logical conclusion that follows from such an idea is that as long as the priests keep the pollution at tolerable levels by repeatedly cleansing the sanctuary with sacrificial blood as a ritual detergent, the people can persist in that behavior without any consequences and God will remain in their midst to bless them with security, prosperity, and well-being *in spite of* that behavior. "Because God dwells in the land as well as in the sanctuary," it is necessary for all who live in the land "to keep the land holy by guarding against impurity and following the prescribed purificatory procedures. . . . Without the commitment of every individual to

eschew impurity and purify if necessary, YHWH would be driven from the land and would not bless the land and its inhabitants with fertility and security (Lev 26:3-11).⁶⁸ The condition for attaining God's blessings is not that the people stop generating pollution by sinning but that they make sure that the level of pollution that their sins generated in the sanctuary does not reach "the point of no return" and exceed the "modicum" that God can safely tolerate. The way in which the people are to avoid the doom and disaster caused by the accumulation of that pollution is not by changing their behavior but by performing the rites with blood that are necessary to wash that pollution away after they have acknowledged those sins and told God that they repent of them. Rather than having the purpose of promoting pure conduct among his people, those rites are aimed at making it possible for God to tolerate their impure conduct without having to withdraw from their presence or impose some other measure that they would find painful or disagreeable.

In fact, according to Milgrom's interpretation of the rites prescribed for *Yom Kippur* in Leviticus 16, those rites can bring about the cleansing of the sanctuary and the people every year independently of the number of sins they have committed and the quantity of pollution that those sins have generated. In that case, there is no need for them to be concerned about these things. The prescriptions for *Yom Kippur* never state that there is a limit to the number of sins that can be expiated through the rites to be performed. Nor do those prescriptions imply that if the people sin more frequently or commit sins that are more grievous in nature, they should offer up a greater number of sacrifices for sin over the course of the year to atone for those sins. This means that, no matter how much the people had sinned or how much pollution their sins had generated, as long as the rites that God had prescribed were performed in the way he had commanded, the result would be the same: "God would continue to reside with Israel because his temple and people were once again pure."⁶⁹

The problems raised by Milgrom's views are especially evident in his consideration of the passages in which God prohibits his people from sacrificing their children to the god Molech or Molek. According to Milgrom, what led God to regard such practices as atrocious and abominable was not primarily his concern for his people's well-being but rather his concern for the purity of his dwelling place: "The sin of the Molek worshiper is exceptionally grievous because of its severe consequence: pollution of the sanctuary and desecration of the name YHWH. The sinner must be killed immediately; any delay jeopardizes the welfare of the entire nation."⁷⁰ If such is the case, what threatens the people's well-being and should fill them with abhorrence and fear is not the practice of human sacrifice itself but the pollution of God's sanctuary that is generated by that practice, since it is not that practice but the pollution generated by it that will lead to God's departure from the

68. Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 252.

69. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 51.

70. Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 253.

sanctuary and the land. The threat that his people face is not from the cruelty and violence associated with the sacrifice of children to gods such as Molech but from God's refusal to dwell in a sanctuary polluted by such sacrifices. Ultimately, rather than needing to be saved from their own injustice, cruelty, and inhumanity, the people need to be saved from God's inability to tolerate that injustice and inhumanity.

According to views such as those of Milgrom, while the God of the biblical texts undoubtedly wishes to be near to his people in order to bless them, what ultimately concerns him is that he be allowed to dwell in his sanctuary in peace, unmolested by anything unclean or polluted. In that case, his priority is himself and his own comfort. His needs and desires take priority over those of his people. If he must choose between dwelling in a polluted sanctuary in order to bless his people or departing from the sanctuary when it becomes polluted in order to distance himself from the impure substance or force that he finds intolerable, he will invariably choose the latter alternative, even if it means depriving his people of his blessings and abandoning them to their doom.

Here again, we find the idea that God's holy and righteous nature is oppressive for both God and his people. In this case, what makes it necessary for God to demand that one animal victim after another be put to death is not his need to ensure that the sins that his people commit receive their due punishment but rather his inability to tolerate substances or forces that irritate and upset him or cause him to react adversely. If he is to remain in their midst, he therefore has no choice but to demand constant sacrifices from his people and to tolerate the modicum of pollution that gradually builds up in his sanctuary in the time between one cleansing and the next.

For their part, the people also find the obligation to provide the sacrificial victims necessary to keep God's sanctuary pure burdensome and oppressive. Nevertheless, they have no choice but to procure those victims and offer them up in sacrifice if they wish for God to dwell among them in order to bless them. In principle, the people might do their best to avoid sinning so as not to generate the impurity that will require that the sanctuary be cleansed with sacrificial blood, yet this too would represent a burden and a challenge for them, given the sinful desires and tendencies that they must constantly attempt to keep under control and repress. At the same time, their concern for the purity of God's sanctuary must outweigh the concern for their own well-being and take priority over it. If the people want to prevent God from abandoning them, they must dedicate themselves, their time, their energy, and their resources to supplying the priests with the animal victims necessary to obtain the blood that will allow the impurity generated by their sins to be washed away. Ultimately the God of Israel becomes akin to a pagan god whose thirst for sacrificial offerings and blood must continually be satiated. Both God and the temple are converted into an idol that demands death and blood and threatens to abandon the people to their doom if they fail to meet those demands.

The notion that God might be driven away from the sanctuary as a result of the accumulation of the impurity generated by the people's sins is problematic for other reasons as well. Such a notion reflects a conception of God that is strongly at odds with that which we find in the Hebrew Bible, where God is consistently presented as the sovereign and all-powerful creator of all that exists. In biblical thought, God can never be endangered by anything within his creation. While gods such as those worshiped by other nations might be subject to forces that were more powerful than they, the same could not be said of the God of Israel as he is portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures. Just as he created all things with his word, so also was he thought to be able to destroy anything that existed with nothing more than a word. Nothing in his creation was thought to be able to cause him harm or injury, and much less threaten his existence or cause him to grow weak or die. Nor does anything that takes place in that creation have the power to drive him away or require that he take measures to protect himself. Such ideas reflect pagan modes of thought rather than the manner of conceiving of God that runs throughout the biblical texts.

In fact, nowhere in the context of the passages from the Pentateuch that prescribe the offering of sacrifice is it ever stated or implied that God will abandon his sanctuary if the expiatory rites that he has prescribed are not carried out there. The only passages to which Milgrom is able to point to justify his claim that God will depart from the sanctuary if the pollution generated by the people's sins reaches "a point of no return" are not in the Pentateuch but in the books of Ezekiel and Lamentations.⁷¹ These passages speak of God's glory and the cherubim departing from the Jerusalem temple and present God abandoning his altar (Ezek 10:18-19; 11:22-23; Lam 2:7). Nowhere, however, do these passages state or imply that the reason for which God departs from the sanctuary is that he finds the impurity or pollution that has accumulated there intolerable or that the sacrificial rites aimed at purifying the temple have not been carried out in accordance with his command. Instead, what leads God to abandon the sanctuary is that he will no longer tolerate the sinful, violent, oppressive, and destructive behavior that the people refuse to turn away from. Furthermore, passages from other books of the Hebrew Bible make it clear that if the people persistently refuse to put away that behavior, no matter how many sacrificial offerings they present to God or how frequently and meticulously they perform the sacrificial rites he has prescribed, they will not obtain his blessing but will remain subject to his wrath.

Although the Mosaic prescriptions insist that those who are unclean as a result of contact or proximity with someone or something that might pollute or contaminate them must not enter into the area in and around the sanctuary, they give no reason for this prohibition. Nothing in the texts, however, ever suggests that God himself was thought to be harmed, endangered, or affected adversely by impurities or by persons or things that are spoken of as impure. There is therefore no reason to suppose that such a prohibition is grounded in

71. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 258.

some type of concern for God himself. This makes it likely that the concern lying behind that prohibition is for the health and well-being of those gathering within the confines of the temple, who might be harmed or infected by any who bore some type of contagious illness or uncleanness.

Giving Substance to the Metaphor of Impurity

One of the claims that is fundamental for interpretations of sacrifices for sin that see their purpose in terms of cleansing people, places, and objects from the impurity or pollution caused by sin is that the sins that people committed were believed to be transformed into some type of actual substance or force, such as the “miasma” of which Milgrom speaks or the “odious, foul objects” to which Schwartz refers. Independently of whether this impure substance or force is said to affect God or human beings, such a conception presupposes once more that the problem that must be addressed is not sinful behavior as such but the pollution or contamination that it generates. In that case, the solution is not to put an end to that behavior but to carry out some type of rite or ritual that will enable the impure substance or force to be covered up, neutralized, absorbed, washed away, or carried off to a place where it can no longer do anyone harm.

There can be little doubt that in the biblical texts and the contexts in which they arose some forms of impurity were conceived of in this manner. Just as visible forms of dirt, filth, pollution, and contamination could have adverse effects on people and cause illness and disease, so also was it evident to all that there were invisible substances and forces that could harm people in various ways. Even though people in antiquity did not know of the existence of microbes such as bacteria or viruses, they would have learned from experience that sicknesses and diseases can be transmitted by contact or close proximity with people or things that are unclean or impure. It was also obvious that many things might enter into states of decay or decomposition and cause aversion and repulsion by the way they smelled, looked, tasted, or felt to the touch. Such things also made people sick. It is therefore natural that the biblical texts declare certain things unclean and affirm that in many cases those who come into close contact with what is unclean or impure are to be considered unclean or impure as well.⁷²

Not everything that the Mosaic prescriptions declared impure was thought to contain some substance or force that made it impure or unclean, however. There is nothing in the commandments that declare certain foods and animals to be impure to suggest that those foods or animals were thought to have some unclean or impure substance or force within them that could adversely affect human beings. In fact, in the passages from Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 in which the distinctions between clean and unclean foods appear, the people are repeatedly told that certain meats and foods shall be

72. See, for example, Lev 5:2-3; 7:19-21; 11:24-39; 15:5-27; 22:4-6; Num 9:6-10; 19:11-22.

“unclean *for you*.” In other words, these commandments refer to things that are to be *regarded* as impure rather than things that are inherently or intrinsically impure. Likewise, when it is said that certain persons or things are to be considered unclean or impure for a particular period of time, such as prior to nightfall or during a certain number of days, the idea is not that whatever harmful substance or force has made them impure will magically disappear the moment in which the specified period of time comes to an end but rather that after a certain amount of time has passed the impure substance or force will have disappeared naturally by itself. In these cases, persons or things could continue to be considered impure for a period of time even when the substance or force that was thought to make them impure was no longer present in them. They *became* pure or clean before they were *accepted* as pure or clean.

For this reason, when it is said in the biblical texts that certain persons or things become impure when they come into contact or proximity with impurity in some form, it cannot be concluded that this is because they were actually thought to become impure in the sense of being infected or penetrated by some type of unclean substance or force. In many cases, what is involved is merely a precautionary measure aimed at ensuring that the person or thing has not been contaminated. People who touch a corpse or come into contact with someone who has a contagious skin disease may be infected or contaminated by some type of harmful substance or force, for example, yet it is also possible that no such infection or contamination occurs. If they show no signs of illness or contagion after a certain period of time, then in most cases it can be concluded that they never were actually infected or contaminated. This means that at times persons and objects that were not *actually* impure were nevertheless to be *regarded* as impure in accordance with certain commandments. When the biblical laws declare certain persons or things to be impure, therefore, this is not always an *observation* about what *actually happened* to them but in many cases is merely a *prescription* regarding how they are *to be regarded*.

At the same time, it is important to stress the distinction between physical and moral impurity. When people became physically impure, it was generally not because they had committed any kind of sin but due to some reason that had nothing to do with sinful behavior, such as contracting a skin disease, coming into contact with a corpse, or giving birth to a child. Conversely, for the most part immoral behavior did not make one physically unclean or impure. While such behavior was certainly unacceptable, the biblical texts never speak of it generating any type of mysterious substance or force that was harmful or dangerous for God or human beings.

There is no reason to suppose, therefore, that the passages from the Hebrew Bible that speak of people becoming impure as a result of behavior that was contrary to God’s will were intended to be understood in a literal, physical, or ontological sense. Instead, such language should be regarded as *metaphorical*.

In passages such as the following, for example, the allusions to both purity and impurity are clearly not to be taken literally:

make them pleasing to God once more after they had sinned. When they had disobeyed God, what was necessary in order for them to obtain his forgiveness was not that they remove some actual stain that their sin had caused or cover up some type of dirt or filth from his sight but that they repent of what they had done and renew their commitment to living in accordance with his will.

These observations should make it clear just how problematic many of the claims made by Milgrom and other scholars who share his views are. Milgrom's assertion that the violation of certain commandments was thought to generate impurity as a "physical substance" that took the form of "an aerial miasma that possessed magnetic attraction for the realm of the sacred" represents the type of baseless and unsubstantiated assumption that is characteristic of the work of many interpreters of the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifice. Milgrom cannot cite a single text from the Hebrew Bible or Second Temple Jewish writings that speak of the impurity or pollution associated with sinful behavior in that manner, simply because there are none. Nor is there anything in the biblical texts to support Gane's affirmation that the people's sins were thought to be "transformed from abstraction, as if out of the air, into a concentrated, quasi-spatially containable form," or Schwartz's claim that the "metaphysical spontaneous generation of impurity" was thought to take place as the result of a process in which "sins metamorphose into impurity."

Such interpretations of the passages that associate sin with impurity and pollution not only involve taking metaphorical language in a literal sense and reading back into the biblical texts ideas that are foreign to them but also raise questions and problems that from a biblical perspective would have been impossible to answer. How could concrete actions materialize into actual substances or forces? Would not sins of omission or the "performative" sins of which Milgrom speaks, such as the failure to observe the Sabbath or help a neighbor in need, also take material form? How could sinful actions then be gathered together from many different locations as an "aerial miasma" or assume a "concentrated, quasi-spatially containable form"? How could they fly or float through the air, at times for hundreds or even thousands of miles? How could the sanctuary serve as a magnet to attract them from such faraway places? Or how could countless sins committed over the course of an entire year throughout the world come to be concentrated together in a substance small enough to penetrate into the high priest's hands and then be transmitted to a goat?

Such a conception of sin also presupposes the existence of some type of impersonal power or mechanism that could automatically define an action or a failure to act as a sin and on that basis generate the impure substance, force, miasma, or pollution that would travel through the air to adhere to the sanctuary. How was this supposed to take place? Were there not, for example, differences of interpretation regarding precisely what actions were permitted on the Sabbath? In that case, who or what could determine whether a particular action had violated the Sabbath commandment? When emergencies arose, was it not acceptable to set aside the literal observance of the Sabbath

commandment? Other commandments from the Decalogue could be equally problematic to interpret. Who or what could determine whether particular individuals had actually failed to honor their father and their mother? If one failed to honor one's grandparents or a step-parent, had one also broken that commandment, or did it apply only to one's biological father and mother? If one accidentally took the life of another person out of no fault of one's own, had one violated the commandment not to kill? Under certain circumstances, was it not permissible to kill another person, such as when one was engaged in warfare or acting in self-defense in the face of a life-threatening attack? If a man became intimate with a woman who was married to another man but did not actually have sexual relations with her, had the two of them actually committed the sin of adultery? If a witness had doubts about the veracity of his or her testimony but chose to give that testimony anyway and it later proved to be false, was he or she guilty of bearing false witness? And how could it be known whether a person had coveted something or someone that belonged to his or her neighbor without examining what was in that person's heart?

In all of these cases, how could anyone but God judge whether a sin capable of generating the malefic substance or miasma had been committed? Would certain sins generate a greater quantity of miasma than others? If one person wrongly killed one man and another person wrongly killed twenty men, did the second person's sin generate twenty times as much miasma as the sin of the first person? Milgrom's claim that "the severity of the sin or impurity varies in direct relation to the depth of its penetration into the sanctuary" raises the same type of problems, as does his affirmation that "wanton unrepented sin" and the sin committed by the community as a whole penetrated furthest into the Most Holy Place or *adytum*. Who but God could determine if a sin that had been committed was "wanton unrepented sin"? What if that sin had been committed collectively by a group of people, but some of them had sinned inadvertently and others wantonly? How much of that sin would generate the "dynamic and malefic" miasma of which Milgrom speaks, and how far would it penetrate into the sanctuary? Would only part of that miasma enter into the Most Holy Place to adhere there and the rest of it remain outside? Did the miasma generated by sins have a mind of its own so that it would know how far to penetrate or which areas and objects of the sanctuary it should adhere to? Or did the severity of the sin determine the strength of the magnetic force that would draw the miasma into the sanctuary? How exactly did the mechanism or process by which miasma was generated work?

Similar questions could be asked regarding the supposed use of blood as a "ritual detergent." Did the amount of blood used have to be proportional to the amount of miasma that the people's sins had generated? Why is this not specified in the texts? If an entire surface had been covered with the miasma that had adhered to it but only a few drops of blood fell on that surface, how would that blood take away all of the miasma that did not come into direct contact with it? If the people or the priest who offered the sacrificial

animal whose blood was being used were not truly and sincerely repentant for the sins they had committed, did the blood still work, or did their lack of repentance instead deprive it of its cleansing power? If only a part of the people who offered the sacrifice was truly repentant, was the cleansing power of the blood diminished in proportion to the percentage of the people who remained unrepentant?

Questions such as these demonstrate just how untenable and even nonsensical many aspects of the interpretations of the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifices for sins put forward by scholars such as Milgrom are. The biblical texts offer no basis for answering questions such as these, yet the reason is not that they fail to provide the details and information necessary to address them but that the type of scheme proposed by Milgrom is so radically at odds with biblical thought that such questions would never have arisen in the first place.

Milgrom's attempt to ground his interpretations in the biblical text are just as problematic. Because the biblical texts never speak of impurity as a physical substance, a magnetic and malefic dynamic force, or as an aerial miasma that possessed electromagnetic properties, Milgrom looks to a handful of ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts that describe rites aimed at expelling demonic beings from pagan temples to claim that impurity was thought to be demonic as well and to constitute a threat to the gods.⁷⁴ On that basis alone, he then argues that the rites prescribed in Leviticus 16 for *Yom Kippur* must be understood as reflecting the same *modus operandi* for the purification of the altar and sacred spaces devoted to Israel's God. His distinction between performative and prohibitive commandments and his claim that the miasma generated by different types of sin penetrated into different areas and objects within the sanctuary are based solely on the observation that Leviticus 16 prescribes several different blood rites that are to be carried out in different areas of the sanctuary on behalf of the high priest himself and his household as well as the people in general. Such an observation hardly justifies the conclusions that Milgrom draws from it.

In addition, Milgrom claims that some of the rites with blood prescribed in Leviticus 16 serve to consecrate the blood while others have "a purgative effect" and that only certain types of sins could be purged by means of the prescribed rites.⁷⁵ These distinctions hardly seem to be grounded in the biblical text. In Lev 16:30, the people themselves are said to be cleansed or purified from all of their sins on *Yom Kippur* even though they never come into contact with any blood on that day. In that case, their purification cannot be attributed to the use of blood as a ritual detergent or cleansing agent. Although rites in which blood is used are said to purify people and objects in a few passages from the biblical texts, nowhere is blood spoken of as a ritual detergent or said

74. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 256–57. For a critique of Milgrom's thought on this subject, see Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 182–92.

75. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1038–43.

to cleanse or purify anyone or anything in itself.⁷⁶ All of these interpretations and others proposed by Milgrom are based purely on speculation and involve reading back into the texts ideas that are nowhere stated explicitly or even implied in them. Some of the distinctions he makes are equally arbitrary and based purely on conjecture rather than any type of solid evidence.

More importantly, however, Milgrom's interpretations of the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifice are based on an understanding of sin and impurity that not only overlooks and ignores the concerns reflected in the biblical texts but also reflects a logic that is foreign to them. As we have seen repeatedly throughout the present study, in the biblical texts the problem that must be addressed is the destructive behavior that prevents people from attaining the happiness and well-being that God in his love desires for all. What is necessary is that people be brought to leave that behavior behind and instead live in ways that promote that well-being and make it possible.

In biblical thought, therefore, the problem is *not* that sinful behavior generates some type of dynamic and malefic substance or force that represents a danger to human beings or to God himself. Nor does the problem faced by God and sinful human beings have to do with their physical proximity to one another or the need for Israel's God to dwell in the sanctuary dedicated to him in order for his people to receive his blessings. The God of the Hebrew Bible can act in any way he wishes among human beings located anywhere on the earth. He has also made it clear that the condition that must be fulfilled in order for people to receive his blessings is that they live and behave in ways that are conducive to their well-being and abandon the ways of living and behaving that undermine and destroy that well-being. What harms human beings is their failure to live in the way God has commanded for their own good rather than any type of malefic substance or force that suddenly and mysteriously materializes out of nowhere every time they break some rule that God has laid down. In order to attain God's blessings, what his people need is not the performance of sacrificial rites aimed at purging the sanctuary dedicated to him from some type of physical pollution through the application of sacrificial blood but their adherence to the way of life that he has graciously laid out for them in the Torah.

The logic behind the passages in the Hebrew Bible that speak of the sins of the people being taken away, therefore, is that once they have been cleansed of their destructive behavior and have been purified in their hearts and minds, God will forgive and forget what they had done in the past and no longer take it into account. Because they will have stopped doing themselves and others harm, God will no longer hold against them the sins, transgressions, and iniquities that they had committed previously. Those sins, transgressions, and iniquities will be washed away, covered up, buried, and cast far from his sight. The reason that God will forgive and forget the past, however, is not that the people will have carried out some type of rite or offered him sacrifices

76. See Lev 14:52; 16:19; 17:11; cf. Ezek 43:18.

but that they will have put away the ways of thinking and behaving that were doing them and others harm. This is the only condition for God's forgiveness and also constitutes the *basis* for that forgiveness. God will overlook the past because of the new present and future that is resulting from the change in the people's behavior, a present and future characterized by justice, righteousness, mercy, solidarity, and a way of life that promotes the well-being of all. It is in that sense that the people, their lives, and their land will be cleansed and purified from the pollution and contamination that their sinful behavior has brought about in the way that the texts describe.

All of these problems are what make interpretations of the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifice such as those of Milgrom so objectionable. In addition to the conceptual difficulties they raise, they suggest that what people needed to obtain God's blessings was not ultimately to avoid sin and injustice but to make sure that they performed the rites necessary to avoid allowing the pollution generated by their sin and injustice to accumulate to the extent that it would drive God away from the sanctuary. In that case, God's concern is not that the people put away their sin and injustice but that they cover it up from his sight or remove it from his presence with sacrifices, blood, and death so that he does not see it and it can no longer bother him. As in penal substitution interpretations, the purpose of the offering of sacrifice becomes, not that of promoting righteous behavior, but making it possible for God to tolerate *unrighteous* behavior.

Attempting to Reconcile Symbol with Reality

Milgrom's writings leave no doubt that he was well aware of many of the problems raised by his interpretations of the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifices for sin, including the kinds of problems just mentioned. He attempted to address them in several different ways, yet those attempts can hardly be considered successful. Thus, for example, in order to avoid the idea that the sacrificial rites produced their desired effect automatically or mechanically, he often stresses that it was necessary for the people participating in the sacrificial rites to be truly repentant in order for those rites to bring about purification and forgiveness.⁷⁷

As we have noted above, however, such a claim is highly problematic in that it suggests that the rites in themselves were thought to produce certain effects by means of some type of *modus operandi*. In biblical thought, it is not the performance of rites that effects purification or obtains God's forgiveness and acceptance but repentance and a renewed commitment to obeying his will. While this repentance and commitment were expressed by means of the rites, those rites were not thought to function mechanically or magically, even if those who performed those rites or participated in them repented of their sins, since the only thing that mattered to God was what he saw in people's hearts

77. See, for example, Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 50: "Expiation by sacrifice depends on two factors: the remorse of the worshiper (verb *'āsām*) and the reparation (noun *'āsām*) he brings to both man and God to rectify his wrong."