## 5 Giving to Yhwh

The bodily and physical aspect of worship receives concrete expression in sacrifices and offerings. Prayer and praise are not merely feelings or words; a sacrifice is “a prayer which is acted”[[1]](#footnote-1) or an act of praise that is acted. Sacrifices and offerings are gifts to Yhwh that express commitment, develop fellowship, dissolve taboo, and make up for shortcomings.

### Act and Interpretation

Understanding the significance of sacrifices and offerings is complex because the texts that describe or prescribe them (notably, Lev 1 – 7) are sparing in their explication. Thus they can have many meanings attributed to them; indeed, it can seem that rituals, “like sacred Rorschach tests, are incapable of resisting any interpretation whatsoever.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In effect, in focusing on the right way to offer sacrifices, texts leave it to offerers to let them signify what they wish to signify by them, like a New Testament writer finding significance in a First Testament text that does not emerge from the text’s inherent meaning. Boundaries for such interpretation are then set by the Scriptures as a whole; as is the case with allegorical interpretation, it would be inappropriate to find significance in the text or the rite that clashed with the inherent meaning of other Scriptures.

If Lev 1 – 7 tells us little of the meaning of sacrifice, what do other Scriptures tell us? The classic Christian understanding issues from Hebrews, that the point of sacrificial worship is to deal with the problem of sin. At the same time, the rest of the New Testament speaks of sacrifice in other connections (e.g., Rom 12:1; 15:16), and the First Testament does not make a close or dominant link between sacrifice and sin. That broader New Testament usage picks up the fact that sacrifice is a way of giving outward embodiment to all aspects of worship; in Lev 1 – 7 itself, sacrifice as a way of dealing with wrongdoing comes only at the end. Leviticus 1:4 does note that the whole offering of a bull makes expiation, and perhaps all offerings were made with an awareness of shortcomings and a need of expiation if any worship or offering is to find acceptance,[[3]](#footnote-3) as all Christian worship involves recognizing that we come to God only on the basis of Christ’s dying for us. But this is not the central point about sacrifice in general or this sacrifice in particular (and the observation is made only in connection with a bull offering), as it is not the only point about Christian worship.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nor does expiation relate to sin in the broad sense but only to things that cause taboo. Nor do the texts bring the savor of the sacrifice into association with expiation, as if implying that savoring this smell means Yhwh is not angry; Leviticus never refers to Yhwh being angry. Nor does the regulation for the whole offering make any reference to pardon, which comes only (and frequently) with the purification offering and reparation offering.

A second classic Christian view is that sacrifice is a way people seek to redeem themselves, an act of self-help taken over from the heathen.[[5]](#footnote-5) Once again, this is not the First Testament’s own perspective. Sacrifice indeed began as a human initiative that was then regulated by divine instruction, but so did prayer (Gen 4:26), and Abel’s sacrifice met with divine favor not divine hesitation (Gen 4:3-4). In the First Testament “the cult is not something man does for God… nor is it performed in order to obtain something from God.” Rather “the cult exists as a means to integrate the communion between God and man which God has instituted in His covenant.”[[6]](#footnote-6) While prophets critique sacrifice, they do not argue that sacrifice and other rituals are means of people seeking to redeem themselves. This is a problem that surfaces first in the New Testament, as an intra-Christian issue.

René Girard suggests that the subliminal significance of sacrifice is to protect the community from its own violence by diverting that violence onto the animal it offered. It breaks the vicious cycle of vengeance. When the sacrificial system breaks down, as the preexilic prophets see it as doing, this accompanies the flourishing of reciprocal violence.[[7]](#footnote-7) Girard, too, thus implies that sacrifice has one meaning, whereas actually its meaning is like the meaning of a word; it changes with time and context.[[8]](#footnote-8) More specifically, it is hard to establish a correlation between times when the sacrificial system flourished and the community was relatively peaceful, and the converse. But Girard’s theory is suggestive for an understanding of what sacrifice might signify in some contexts.

### Act and Word

Importance attaches to the simple act of making an offering; from Leviticus, one could reckon it was done in silence.[[9]](#footnote-9) But the Psalms associate offering sacrifices with shouting, singing, making music, and calling on Yhwh or confessing Yhwh’s name (Pss 27:6; 54:6 [MT 8]; 107:22; 116:17).[[10]](#footnote-10) The two aspects of worship, the correlation of acts and words, appear in Ps 54:6 [MT 8]: “For your munificence[[11]](#footnote-11) I will sacrifice to you; I will confess your name, Yhwh, for it is good.” It involves both the symbolic action and the words testifying to what Yhwh has done. Genesis points in a similar direction as speechless offerings and calling on Yhwh alternate or come together (Gen 4:3-4 and 26; 12:7-8).[[12]](#footnote-12) Thanksgiving and praise accompany the daily whole offerings (1 Chr 23:30-31); the word *tôdâ* itself refers both to a prayer of thanksgiving and a thankoffering.[[13]](#footnote-13) Deuteronomy emphasizes the words of prayer and thanksgiving,[[14]](#footnote-14) and Lev 5:5 requires a confession of one’s offence to accompany a purification offering. The fact that there was nothing very distinctively Israelite in most of the acts involved in offering would also make it natural to reckon that act and word went together.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Psalm 65 does begin “To you silence is praise,[[16]](#footnote-16) God in Zion,” though the fact that it then goes on at some length to articulate outward praise would make it deconstruct and raises a question about its meaning; the clue likely lies in the similar beginning to Ps 62, “Yes, towards God my spirit is silent,” which continues, “from him is my deliverance.” Silence is praise in the sense that a still, trusting reliance on God is an indication of recognizing that God is the one in whom we put our hope. Thus Ps 65 also goes on, “And to you a promise is fulfilled, one who listens to prayer.” Silence is the mark of resting in the God to whom we pray when we are under pressure, and to whom we look forward to bringing our grateful offerings when Yhwh has responded. And that expression of gratitude will need to be noisy in order to fulfill its object of bearing witness.[[17]](#footnote-17) Perhaps that is the point of the declaration that, when Yhwh puts down my attackers and delivers me, praising and exalting Yhwh with a song of thanksgiving will please Yhwh more than an ox (Ps 69:30-31 [MT 31-32]). But this psalm may presuppose a situation when it is impossible to offer sacrifices, because the temple is not functioning (cf. Ps 51:16-19 [MT 18-21]) or because the suppliant cannot go there (cf. Ps 42); it would be this that prompts the comment that as symbols ideally need to accompany words, so words are vitally important in their own right. While offerings are unacceptable when not linked to a life of self-offering to Yhwh and to other people, a converse is also true. There is something perverted about love for one’s neighbor without love for God, and something inadequate about offerings without words.

“Sing” and “proclaim,” Ps 96 begins, and then goes on, “bestow on Yhwh honor and might” (“bestow” repeats three times, as did “sing” earlier). English translations have “ascribe” honor, suggesting that Yhwh has the honor and people are to recognize it, which is of course true, but the verb (*yāhab*)means “give.” So more likely the implication is that people have honor, and they are to give it over to Yhwh. The psalm goes on to indicate that it is by making an offering and bowing down before Yhwh, like subjects bringing tribute to a king, that they bestow honor on Yhwh. The offering and bowing thus complement the singing. Once more, worship involves not merely an attitude of heart but the sounding of a voice and the bringing of something solid that costs. And once again the psalm moves on from the outward gesture to the declaration that it embodies: “Say among the nations: ‘Yhwh began to reign.’” The bringing of tribute expresses recognition of this, in such a way as to proclaim it publicly; again, an honoring with the heart does not have that effect.

### Gifts

All sacrifice involves the giving of a gift to the deity.[[18]](#footnote-18) But gifts can have a variety of meanings. In human relationships, giving can be an expression of love or gratitude or regret, or a way of seeking to create or develop a relationship or an obligation or a commitment, or it can be a a bribe. Analogous significances may attach to sacrifice as a gift. As gifts, sacrifices have been seen as inherently “rituals of defence.”[[19]](#footnote-19) They recognize that human beings are in a position of dependence, impotence, and vulnerability in relation to deity as children are in relation to parents, under their care and control but subject to actions on their behalf that they experience as suffering, neglect, and deprivation. Even sacrifices that express joy and gratitude then express this vulnerability rather than spontaneous love. It would be unduly cynical to reckon that this is the inherent underlying nature of relationships with parents or deity, but one can recognize that this can be an aspect of the relationship. A variant on this understanding starts from the way sacrifices also accompany movements or changes of status such as from being a layman to being a priest. Sacrifices themselves involve something moving from the human to the divine realm; hence the need for this movement to be properly supervised, by someone who is acceptable to both worlds. The design of a sanctuary symbolizes the existence of the two realms and the facilitating of movement between them.

All the various significances of giving presuppose something about a mutual relationship, one actual or desired or made the pretext for something the giver wants to achieve. Conversely, relationship presupposes giving; if there is no mutual giving, there is hardly relationship. So Yhwh gives to Israel, and Israel gives to Yhwh.

Its community sacrifices are thus part of its relationship with God; they are mostly offered according to a calendar. Numbers 28:3-8 prescribes whole offerings each morning and evening, a way of making a regular act of honoring Yhwh,[[20]](#footnote-20) though there are indications elsewhere (e.g., Ezek 46:13-15) that this was not the pattern throughout Israel’s history.[[21]](#footnote-21) The Psalms, too, refer to worship in the morning and at night (Ps 92:2 [MT 3]) but more often to morning worship alone (Pss. 5:3 [MT 4]; 59:16 [MT 17]; 88:13 [MT 14]). There are to be double offerings on the sabbath, larger-scale offerings for the new moon, for Massot, Weeks, Horns, and Expiation Day, and yet larger ones for Sukkot (Num 28:9 – 29:38). Numbers 7 relates how the leaders of the clans brought carts and oxen for the transport of the covenant chest, and for the altar’s dedication brought offerings of silver bowls, silver basins, ladles, flour, oil, incense, and sacrificial animals, all of which Yhwh told Moses to accept. These are called gifts (*qorbān*, from *qārab*, something brought near), essentially a synonym of the word for an offering (*minhâ*). The account compares with the people’s bringing gifts for the making of the sanctuary, with the difference that there Yhwh tells Moses to bid the people bring gifts (Ex 25:1-2). Here the clan leaders take the initiative and Yhwh tells Moses how to respond.

There are also individual offerings, part of the individual’s relationship with God; these are mostly occasional. They can be a bull or sheep or goat, but for many of them, the regulations allow poorer people to give something more manageable than that expected of people who are better-off (Lev 1:14-17; 5:7-13; 12:8; 14:21-32; 27:2-8). There is no suggestion that the smaller offering is inferior. As with gifts between human beings, it is not the monetary value of the offering that counts.

Naturally, an animal to be offered must be a fine, complete example of its species, though a male is acceptable even though it is more expendable and thus less valuable. While the acknowledging of someone’s worth-ship is not the living meaning of the English word “worship,” this etymology does point to the significance of a complaint in this connection in Mal 1:6 – 2:3. People are offering as sacrifices animals that are blind, lame, sick, or stolen. The earlier plaints in this list might make one wonder whether this is just a sign of people’s hardship, though even then one suspects that Malachi, like Haggai, would still reckon that the best should go to Yhwh. But in any case, the addition of reference to animals that people have stolen takes the matter to another level. Such offerings are no way to “honor” God or “revere” God; the connotations of those verbs are not so far from those of “worship.” Such sacrifices rather suggest contempt. Yhwh would rather the priests lock the temple doors and stop lighting fires on the altar than collude with such offerings.

### Whole Offering and Grain Offering

In its systematic treatment of sacrifices, Lev 1 – 7 begins with the whole offering, ‘*olâ* or *kālîl*. The first word suggests it is something that “goes up” to Yhwh as it ascends in the form of smoke, a nice smell for Yhwh to savor. This expression occurs occasionally in connection with other offerings, but most often in connection with the whole offering and the grain offering (e.g., Lev 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9, 12). Israel offers something nice to Yhwh, and Yhwh likes it. While whole offerings can be offered on their own (e.g., Gen 22:1-14; Judg 6:26; 13:16; Ezra 8:35), when people offer several sacrifices, the whole offering is often mentioned first (e.g., Ex 18:12; 24:5; 32:6; Lev 12:6; Deut 12:6, 11; 27:6-7), though on some occasions it is preceded by the purification offering (e.g., Lev 8). If the full order is purification offering, then whole offering, then fellowship offering (Lev 9),[[22]](#footnote-22) then the Christian instinct that sees confession and absolution as needing to be the first element in worship corresponds to this.

The word *kālîl* underlines the fact that “all” of this offering goes to Yhwh. Its blood is splattered all around the altar, perhaps on all four horns at the four corners. Thus, whereas the worshiper shares in some other kinds of offering, a whole offering means what it says. Such offerings are indeed a means of giving something to God.[[23]](#footnote-23) In the context of other religions, expressions such as “a relaxing smell” (e.g., Lev 1:9) or “their God’s food” (e.g., Lev 21:6) would imply people feed God and God eats, but Leviticus and other books in the First Testament lack the framework of thinking that would fit that idea. The terms are “petrified linguistic survivals,” which even ordinary people would likely not dream of taking literally, otherwise neither Leviticus nor the prophets would have used them.[[24]](#footnote-24) Rather, talk of Yhwh liking the smell of a sacrifice is a vivid way of indicating that Yhwh accepts it. The fact that the offering is burnt in its entirety in the sanctuary courtyard and nothing is taken into the holy place or the very holy place as happened with other religions, might safeguard against the idea that the offering is actually food for God.[[25]](#footnote-25)

A whole offering can accompany prayer (e.g., 1 Sam 7:9-10; 13:8-12; 2 Sam 24:21-25): it “was a signal to God that His worshipers desired to bring their needs to His attention.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The nice barbecue smell attracts that attention. This is perhaps implicit in the first whole offerings in Gen 8:20-21. Israel thus reaches out to Yhwh when it wants Yhwh to meet with the people, in keeping with Yhwh’s own invitation to do so (e.g., Lev 9), as is the case with the regular whole offerings (Ex 29:38-43; cf. Num 23), or when it seeks something from Yhwh (for instance, in the rite in Num 5:11-31). But elsewhere the whole offering can fulfill a vow or be a voluntary offering, like the fellowship offering (e.g., Lev 22:17-19). Perhaps something of the history of sacrifice is reflected here.

The grain offering (*minhâ*), of raw grain or grain baked into bread, and enriched by olive oil and spices, could be made as an accompaniment to other offerings (e.g., Ex 29:40-41; 40:29), like bread to go with meat. But in Lev 2 it is simply an offering in its own right, as the word suggests: in itself, *minhâ* simply means “offering” (or “tax”) and it can apply to an animal sacrifice (Gen 4:3-5; 1 Sam 2:17) and to ordinary gifts, especially from subordinates to people above them whose favor they wish to win or regain or retain. Like the whole offering, it can be a way of seeking expiation (Lev 14:20; 1 Sam 3:14), but as a gift it can have other significance, such as accompanying prayer. It is an even more “humble,” everyday offering than a dove or pigeon, and an even more meaningful one for ordinary people (cf. Lev 5:11-13). In contrast to the whole offering, only a token portion (the *’azkārā*)is offered directly to Yhwh by being burned, while the main part goes to the priests. The offerer thus still gives up the whole; it is something “very holy” (Lev 2:3).

Leviticus 1 – 7 does not include regulations for the wine offering, though it has been prescribed in Ex 29:40-41 in association with the whole offering and grain offering (cf. Lev 23:13, 18, 37; Num 15:1-16; 28 – 29). It would be natural to accompany a meal with wine as well as bread.

### The Fellowship Sacrifice

We are not sure how to translate the expression for the third form of offering (Lev 3), *zebah* *šĕlāmîm*. A sacrifice (*zebah*) is an act that involves killing something that is then shared by worshipers and Yhwh (see, e.g., Deut 27:7; 1 Sam 1:4-5). It is thus not “very holy,” absolutely holy; ordinary people can join in eating it. But it is “holy,” and all of it must be eaten on the day it is offered, or the next day; anything left until the third day must be burnt, not eaten. The word *šĕlāmîm* could have various connotations, but it does recall *šālôm* and thus might suggest “well-being” (NRSV) or “fellowship” (TNIV). The latter is the more obvious implication as these sacrifices are occasions when families and/or the whole community eat together, and do in fellowship with Yhwh. “If… the notion of sacrifice as food for the deity was not prominent in ancient Israel, the function of sacrifice as food for human beings in order to effect or generate solidarity and community is evident in the centrality of table fellowship as part of the ritual of sacrifice.” Eating together before Yhwh brings into being or cements their relationship.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Yhwh desires to be in the kind of fellowship with Israel that involves eating together, though people eat “before” Yhwh not “with” Yhwh, and once again Leviticus hardly implies that Yhwh ate the sacrifice. While the portions allocated to Yhwh are described as “food” (Lev 3:11, 16), these portions were not very edible. The animals offered at a fellowship sacrifice indeed constitute food, for the offerer (the whole offering and grain offering, from which the offerer did not eat, were not described as food). The priest offers the animal to Yhwh and it thus belongs to Yhwh, so that what the offerers then eat is the food of God. The actual expression “food of God” can also be used more generally of the offerings, though there, too, the fellowship offerings may be especially in mind (Lev 21:22 refers to the fact that the priests eat the food of God, which would not apply to the whole offering).

All this may point to one of the rationales for sacrifice. Eating meat was not Yhwh’s original intention for humanity but it was subsequently allowed, apparently as a realistic concession to humanity’s disobedient inclinations, on condition that people drain the blood before eating (Gen 1:29; 9:2-4). The blood symbolized the life of the animal, the life that humanity shares with animals and that comes from God and belongs to God. Not being distanced from animal slaughter by the supermarket, Israelites might be aware of the ongoing ambiguity of eating meat: it is nice and Yhwh allows it, but it is barbaric. Making the animal an offering to Yhwh (even if the worshipers then eat most of it) turns a barbecue into a worship event. Coming before Yhwh to kill and eat an animal perhaps helps people handle the inherent ambiguity of eating meat. Leviticus 17:10-12 thus not only prohibits the consuming of blood but also notes that this same blood is the means of expiation for the lives of the people eating. Its regulation would affect only the fellowship sacrifice, because this is the one sacrifice that the offerer chiefly eats and it is thus the one when the question of consuming the blood might arise. When Lev 17:10-12 adds to the explicit regulation for the fellowship sacrifice that the offering of the blood on this occasion makes expiation for the offerers, perhaps the wrong for which it is making expiation is the wrong inherent in killing an animal with Yhwh’s life in it.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Leviticus 7:11-18 does make clear three reasons for making a fellowship sacrifice. It may be a freewill or voluntary offering, simply expressing self-giving to God. It may be a thanksgiving offering, expressing gratitude to God for something. Or it may be a votive offering, which also implies such gratitude, but with the implication that in praying for something the person had promised to come back with an offering and is now doing so because God has granted the prayer. Psalm 66:13-20 has someone making whole-offerings to fulfill a vow. These whole-offerings accompany or are accompanied by testimony to what Yhwh has done, and thus they resemble fellowship sacrifices, but perhaps they are whole-offerings (in which the offerer does not share) as a mark of how great is Yhwh’s deliverance and how heart-felt the person’s praise.

### The Purification Offering

The *hattā’t* offering (Lev 4:1 – 5:13; 6:24-30 [MT 17‑23]) presupposes that people have acted (or failed to undertake some action) in a way that fell short of Yhwh’s standards. They have gone astray (*šāgag/šāgâ*; Lev 4:2, 13, 22, 27). The offenders may be a priest or ruler (whose offences would affect the whole people), the people as a whole, or ordinary individuals. The traditional rendering “sin-offering” is misleading. The *hattā’t* need not relate to “sin” in the sense of religious or moral wrongdoing; the “solution” to sin is repentance, which brings Yhwh’s forgiveness as Yhwh personally carries the sin, pays the price for it.[[29]](#footnote-29) The offences to which a *hattā’t* relates are inadvertent ones, done by accident, or without a realization that what one did was wrong, or perhaps done through fear or negligence; they might or might not have moral implications. Numbers 15:17-31 restates the instructions regarding inadvertent failure to keep Yhwh’s regulations and then makes explicit that such offerings cannot make up for deliberate offences. Deliberate offenders are “cut off from the midst of their people,” which might mean they may not take part in worship or might mean they are liable to action by Yhwh that would cut them off from the community. They must “carry their wrongdoing,” unless they repent and beseech Yhwh to carry it.

Elsewhere than in Lev 4, the purification offering often relates not to acts but to states of things, such as that of the altar when it has just been built (Ex 29:36) or of a woman who has just given birth (Lev 12) or of someone who has recovered from skin disease (Lev 14). The point is that the act or the state brings taboo on the person; it introduces an incompatibility between who they are and who Yhwh is.[[30]](#footnote-30) If they come into the sanctuary, that would bring taboo on it (cf. Lev 15:31). Indeed, their very presence in the community centered on the sanctuary could have this effect (cf. Num 19). And the result of that would be an unwillingness on Yhwh’s part to be present there among the people.

A person affected by such taboo can be purified by waiting and washing (see, e.g., Lev 15) and/or can make expiation and be pardoned through making an offering (Lev 4:20, 26, 31, 35). It is to the sanctuary that the blood of the offering is then applied (Lev 4:7, 17-18, 25, 30, 34). The particular concern of the purification offering is thus with the offense’s affect on the sanctuary itself, though it seems implausible to argue that the rite did not also effect purification for the person.[[31]](#footnote-31) It is a means of “de-failing” or decontaminating: the verb *hātā’* can be used in the piel privative, suggesting removal of the shortcoming or taboo (e.g., Lev 6:26 [MT 19]).

Leviticus 5:1-4 goes on to give some concrete illustrations of actions that require a purification offering: failure to testify in a legal case (not realizing that one had germane evidence, or being negligent in coming forward?), or unwitting contact with something taboo, or uttering an oath (presumably that one could not or did not keep). These seem rather different in kind from the acts presupposed by Lev 4, though all have implications for the sanctuary (this could include failure to offer testimony, since the sanctuary was also the place where people came to have conflicts resolved). People who have committed such acts must confess them (Lev 5:5), which puts things right in their personal relationship with God and with the community and thus deals with the relational implications of the act. But its objective result still needs handling. In effect, confession is able “to convert deliberate sins into inadvertences, thereby qualifying them for sacrificial expiation.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Simply offering a sacrifice in connection with an offence would not be enough; one has to own what one has done. Simply confessing one’s offence is not enough; one has to make the appropriate offering, to make expiation for the defiling consequences of the act.

The regulations for the purification offering put much more emphasis on acts with the animal’s blood than is the case with other offerings. As is the case with many aspects of the regulations, they do not explain what the acts achieve or how they work. The offerer also presses his or her hand on the animal, which might in different contexts signify transference of something from one to another (in this context, transferring stain or guilt, which is then expunged through the animal’s death, substituting for the death of the offender), or the identification of a person with something (indicating that it stands for and substitutes for this particular person), or the consecration or dedication of something by someone, or the ownership of something.[[33]](#footnote-33)

### The Reparation Offering

Leviticus 5:14 – 6:7 [MT 5:14‑26] continues to speak in terms of people falling short (*hātā’*) and going astray (*šāgag*) with regard to Yhwh’s sacred things, but adds that in doing so they have committed an offence or trespass (*ma‘al*; Lev 5:15). They have encroached on something belonging to Yhwh; they have committed sacrilege. Achan did so at Ai in taking from what belongs to Yhwh; King Uzziah did so in offering incense in the temple (Josh 7:1; 2 Chr 26:16). The men of the Second Temple community did so in mixing holy seed with the local peoples (Ezra 9:1-2; cf. Ezra 10:19 for the reparation offering that follows). The action of Eli’s sons (1 Sam 2:12-17) is not described as *ma‘al*, but would count as a shocking example. So would any withholding of due offerings.

In such situations people need to bring a trespass offering (KJV) or reparation offering (*’āšām*; Lev 5:15); the common rendering “guilt offering” is too general. It involves making up for their shortcoming (*šallēm*) but also adding an extra fifth as reparation for the failure. This reparation is also required in connection with false oaths, when someone has committed theft or fraud and sworn that they have not done so (Lev 6:1-7 [MT 5:20-26]). An offering is then due to Yhwh in respect of (for instance) the false oath, as well as reparation being due to the defrauded human being (cf. Num 5:5-8). Perhaps the wrong done to someone else is seen as in itself also an offence against Yhwh, a profound theological point that fits other aspects of the way the First Testament talks. But in the context the regulations more likely assume that a wrong done to someone else is also an offence against Yhwh when a person misuses Yhwh’s name in swearing that they are innocent when actually they are guilty. Such an offence is not, of course, an unwitting or accidental one. The regulation again covers the situation when someone confesses their wrongdoing rather than simply being found out or living in denial or refusing to acknowledge that they did wrong. Then it is as if their intention has changed; the offence indeed happened, but it can now be treated as an inadvertent one.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In connection with the reparation offering, the purification offering, and others, I have translated the verb *kipper* as “make expiation”; it may be that the word’s more literal meaning is either “wipe clean” or “cover” or “ransom,” but we do not know.[[35]](#footnote-35) The object of *kipper* is the offence that a person has committed, not the one they have offended. Thus sacrifices do not propitiate God, as if they presuppose that God was angry (there are no references to God’s anger in Leviticus).[[36]](#footnote-36) While there are certainly occasions when God feels wrath towards Israel, sacrifices cannot deal with that wrath, because sacrifices do not deal with deliberate, “proper” sin. The only way to deal with that sin is to turn away from it for the future and cast yourself on God’s mercy for the past. Insofar as sacrifices have a relationship with God’s anger, the relationship is that by dealing with whatever has happened, by expiating it, they proactively make sure there is no reason for God to get angry.

One way or the other the verb *kipper* indicates that the offence no longer affects the offerer. “It does not greatly signify, in explaining it, whether we start from the idea of *covering over* or from that of *wiping out*: in either case, the idea which the metaphor is intended to convey is that of *rendering null* and *inoperative*.”[[37]](#footnote-37) In itself this does not signify reconciliation or atonement; “expiation” is not a relational word, like the word atonement.[[38]](#footnote-38) While the First Testament is indeed concerned about at-one-ment between people and God, expiation relates more directly with the need to deal with something that threatens whether Yhwh can possibly be present with people.

### The Offering of the First

All human beings and animals belong to Yhwh because Yhwh is the source of their life. Yhwh shapes their bodies and breathes into them their breath. It is a common conviction that special significance attaches to the firstborn, the one who opens a woman’s womb and gives first expression to a man’s manly vigor (cf. Deut 21:17); the birth of the firstborn opens up the possibility of there being further offspring and a whole new generation to follow. Special responsibilities, hopes, and privileges attach to the firstborn. The First Testament works both with and against this set of assumptions. In Genesis God keeps working against it, privileging Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Ephraim over Manasseh. But then Yhwh claims all that open the womb (Ex 13:1-2), and the Torah does not allow parents to ignore the position of the firstborn, as happened to Esau (Deut 21:15-17). The Torah’s basis for this claim lies in Yhwh’s deliverance of the people from Egypt (Ex 13:11-16), because Israel is (as it were) Yhwh’s firstborn son, and if Israel is not given over to Yhwh voluntarily, Yhwh will take him by force and will take the firstborn of Egypt into the bargain. In commemoration of that event, Israel’s firstborn animals and sons are owed to Yhwh; a “natural” observance comes to have a link with Yhwh’s special act toward Israel. In practice, this means the firstborn of livestock are owed to Yhwh (Deut 15:19-23), while firstborn sons are redeemed (Ex 13:11-16; 34:19-20); the means of redemption is unstated, though Exodus may imply one offers a sheep (Num 18:16 sets a redemption price of five shekels). Subsequently Yhwh declares the intention to accept the clan of Levi with their livestock instead of the firstborn and theirs (Num 3:11-13, 40-51; 8:15-18).

People were expected similarly to dedicate the first of the harvest to Yhwh, and the best of it (Ex 23:16, 19; 34:22, 26; Lev 23:17, 20; Num 18:13). To make things practical, people can turn their tithe and firstlings into money in order to be able to take it to the sanctuary, then reconvert it to the wherewithal for a feast when they get there (Deut 14:22-26). And to bring things home within the family, from the first batch of dough people are to offer a loaf (Num 15:17-21). When people plant fruit trees, they must not eat their fruit at all for three years, when they are still on their way to maturity and full fruitfulness, in the fourth year their fruit is to be exultant holiness for Yhwh, then from the fifth year people can use it in the regular way (Lev 19:23-25). Like other observances, many of these practices were also harnessed to meeting the needs of people who did not have land: the priests and Levites’ needs were met through the dedication of the first of the harvest, as offerings support the priests and tithes support the Levites (Num 18:8-32).

To come into Yhwh’s presence, then, do you have to bring costly or copious offerings, even give Yhwh your own firstborn, in order to make up for the way you have rebelled against him and fallen short of him? Does Yhwh make demands of the people that wear them out? “My people, what have I done to you, how have I wearied you?” Yhwh asks (Mic 6:3-7). They behave as if Yhwh had let them down or exhausted them (*lā’â*). Perhaps Yhwh had done so in bringing them out of serfdom in Egypt or in providing them with leaders for their subsequent journey or in rescuing them from the curses planned by Balak or in taking them from Shittim across the Jordan? I have not let you down (*hel’ētîkā*) but brought you up (*he’eltîkā*), says Yhwh. If they do think about that story, it will surely lead them to acknowledge Yhwh’s faithfulness rather than implicitly finding fault with the way Yhwh has dealt with them.[[39]](#footnote-39) No, Yhwh does not make demands that wear people out. First Testament offerings have a token, symbolic nature. They do not pretend to make up for wrongdoing in a quantitative way. They do not cause Yhwh to accept people; the instinct to do so comes from inside Yhwh. Further, more important than these offerings is a turning round of the life that replaces rebellion and failure with *mišpāt* and *hesed*, commitment to other people expressed in decisive action towards them, and also a different stance in relation to God (Mic 6:8).[[40]](#footnote-40)

### The Offering of Human Beings

The sacrifice of one’s child (not necessarily a small child) is an extreme act of dedication in which a person might indulge when feeling particular need to get a prayer answered; and it may work (see 2 Kings 3:27). Moses and the prophets reckon it self-evident that this is an abhorrent practice (e.g., Is 57:5-6). There is no need to justify condemning people when they build sanctuaries for incinerating Judah’s sons and daughters (Jer 7:31). People will find their own destiny lies in these canyons: they will find themselves sucked into the fate of these children.

Isaiah 66:3-4 puts together slaughtering an ox, beating a person, sacrificing a sheep, strangling a dog, offering pigs’ blood, offering incense, and worshiping wickedness. In LXX and 1QIsa this description of wrongdoing makes a comparison: offering “proper” worship can be no better than offering false worship, if the rest of people’s lives clashes with their worship. In MT people are trying to have things both ways, as they did before the exile. They offer proper worship of Yhwh, but they also sacrifice human beings, offer dogs and pigs, and worship idols. The prophecy does not describe these acts in literal, neutral terms. It does not assume we should be respectful of other people’s religious practices. Sacrificing one’s child would be a costly and grievous act, but Yhwh speaks of it as an act of assault, a mugging, a beating. Reference to observances involving pigs and dogs is designed to be especially disgusting. Worshiping another god or using an image in worship becomes worshiping wickedness. In such observances, people will have seen themselves as calling on Yhwh, but as Yhwh sees it, they do no such thing. Indeed, whereas Yhwh had called on them, presumably through prophets summoning them to reform, they did not respond. They made their choices in accordance with what they liked. Yhwh will do the same. Their worship, with its hedging of debts, is designed to maximize the possibility of guarding against calamities they dreaded, but it will have the opposite effect.

One could describe a child offered to Yhwh as *hērem*, which is “a process of consecration through destruction…. It is the ultimate in dedication.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Modern readers agree with the prophets that also no argument is required to demonstrate the abhorrent nature of this practice. Yet the offering of a beloved son is a central or foundational element in Judaism (following Gen 22) and in Christianity. A “barbaric ritual” is thus subjected to a “transformation… into a sublime paradigm of the religious life.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

It is not only living things that can be devoted; such devoting does not inherently imply their death. People can commit themselves to offering a piece of land or some other possession as *hērem* as well as a person or animal (Lev 27:28; Num 18:14). In connection with a person, the idea that this would involve killing them would be hard to fit with other attitudes expressed in the Torah. Rather, it means giving them over to God irrevocably, so that they come into the service of the temple and priesthood, like Samuel. But the term *hērem* first features in the Torah as a way of describing execution, specifically for sacrificing to a god other than Yhwh (Ex 22:20 [MT 19]; cf. Deut 13:12-18 [MT 13-19]; this could explain the postscript in Lev 27:29). Yhwh is claiming these people because of their faithlessness and waywardness, and Israel is handing them over to Yhwh in accordance with that claim. Such execution does not simply fulfill a function in connection with the framework of law or act as a deterrent or resolve issues within the community or give redress to people who have lost a family member.[[43]](#footnote-43) In connection with the worship of other gods, the execution pays for an offence against Yhwh. But it is a form of sacrifice, a ritual expression of beliefs and values that definitively removes from the community a person thought to be depraved.[[44]](#footnote-44) Such sacrifice links with the notion of devoting a whole people, which first appears in Num 21:1-3, where it is Israel’s proposal, accepted by Yhwh. In the framework of Israelite thinking and instinct, war, death, sacrifice, and *hērem* are integrally associated, and understanding *hērem* requires us to see it in connection with the realm of the sacred and with sacrifice.[[45]](#footnote-45) In light of their wrongdoing, the Canaanites require to be given over to God. They become absolutely holy; they cannot be returned to everyday usage. They are not quite unique in this respect. Yhwh issues the same command about the Amalekites (1 Sam 15), and in due course acts in this way towards Israel (Is 43:28). The last, at least, indicates that we have to be careful about how literally we take references to *hērem*.[[46]](#footnote-46)

### Offerings and Death

The sacrifice of children is also a feature of the worship of Molek: “You are not to give any of your offspring for passing over to Molek; you are not to profane the name of your God; I am Yhwh (Lev 18:21). Molek may not be a real name but a word comprising the consonants of the word for king, *melek*, or of the actual name of a deity, perhaps Malik, combined with the vowels of the word for shame, *bōšet*.[[47]](#footnote-47) The pronouncing of the name thus passes a theological judgment on the practice it bans; Malik or the supposed King is an object of shame. Apparently people could offer a child to Molek as a sacrifice, killing the child and then burning it as they did with animal sacrifice, yet see themselves as serving Yhwh, Molek being Yhwh’s underling; hence the declaration that actually they are profaning Yhwh’s name, and polluting the sanctuary (Lev 20:1-6) as they come into it with blood on their hands (Ezek 23:37-39). Indeed, they profane the land (Ps 106:38), turning it into a land like any other, not a land that truly belongs to Yhwh.

 This sacrifice of children is also linked with turning to ghosts and spirits, trying to make contact with dead members of one’s family in order to get guidance (see Lev 20:1-6; Deut 18:10-11; 2 Kings 17:17; 21:6; 2 Chr 33:6; Is 8:19-20). The offerers are not worshiping their ancestors, but they are looking to them for something for which they should look only to Yhwh. The link may suggest that people saw Molek as (under Yhwh) the king of Sheol; Is 57:9 refers to offerings to “the king,” likely a reference to Molek where his title has not been bowdlerized, and makes a connection with journeys to Sheol. The indications of a link between Molek and Sheol fit with the indications from elsewhere that Malik was a god of the underworld.[[48]](#footnote-48) Making offerings to Molek was a way of trying to ensure that one made contact with people there, and offering one’s child would be an extreme way of seeking to ensure that.

It is a distinctive feature of First Testament faith to recognize the distinction between life and death and recognize Yhwh as the God of life.[[49]](#footnote-49) Yhwh being the only God, it would have been possible to make Yhwh the God of Sheol as well as the God of this earth, and certainly the First Testament knows that Yhwh is the Lord of Sheol in the sense that there is no other deity in charge there; Yhwh determines who goes there and who comes out of there. But Yhwh generally chooses not to be involved with Sheol, and no other deity is involved there (e.g., Pss 6:5 [MT 6]; 88:10-12 [MT 11-13]). This is a counter-cultural conviction, clashing with natural human instincts among the Canaanites and Israelites.[[50]](#footnote-50) But the First Testament itself has turned its back on these natural human instincts. In having recourse to “the King,” people are having recourse to a lie and are acting out a lie (cf. Is 28:15). Trusting in Yhwh continues to be the key to the future.

The ban on sacrificing children to Molek first appears in the context of regulations concerning sexual activity (Lev 18:21), and the development of this regulation (Lev 20:1-6) refers three times to the fact that the person in question is sacrificing “his offspring.” There is thus a further objection to this practice. As well as dishonoring Yhwh by acting as if Molek really represented Yhwh, and seeking to treat the dead as a resource for guidance, it involves despising your offspring. Contact with the dead, with those who came before you, is more important to you than your concern for the living and for the future of your family and your people.

1. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (London: DLT/New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), p. 451; cf. Preuss, *OT Theology* 2:244. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1992), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Worship in Israel* (Oxford: Blackwell/Richmond: Knox, 1966), p. 116. Vriezen (*An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, pp. 286-87 [2nd ed., pp. 261-62]) declares that “the whole of the sacrificial cult is dominated by the idea of atonement,” but glosses this to mean that it relates to “the renewal of the relation” between God and people. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See further §3.6 “Penitence and Sacrifice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. So Ludwig Köhler, *Old Testament Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), p. 181. Contrast the comments in Preuss, *OT Theology* 2:210. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. So Vriezen, *An Outline of OTTheology*, p. 280 (2nd ed., p. 255); the second sentence is italicized. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Violence and the Sacred* (reprinted Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins, 1989), pp. 8, 43. George Pattison interestingly applies this to the story of relationships between the Israelites clans and the resolution of internal conflicts in Israel (“Violence, Kingship and Cultus,” *ExpT* 102 [1990-91]: 135-40), but this presupposes that the story of how Israel became Israel in the land involved conflict between various indigenous groups rather than people coming from outside in the way the story works. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See David Janzen, *The Social Meanings of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible* (BZAW 344; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2004), pp. 1-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, pp. 303-4. But this seems to be an argument from silence…. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Kraus, *Worship in Israel*, p. 124. Israel Knohl sees the Levitical regulation as “an idealized approach,” designed as a recognition of God’s loftiness (*The Sanctuary of Silence* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], p. 149; see also Knohl, *The Divine Symphony* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003), pp. 71-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. EVV have “A freewill offering”; but as the psalmist is making a promise to bring an offering when Yhwh has answered the prayer, it will not then be a freewill offering but the fulfillment of a promise (see Lev 7:11-18 and the section on “fellowship offerings” below). More likely, then, the expression refers here to Yhwh’s generosity, not the suppliant’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Samuel E. Balentine (*The Torah’s Vision of Worship* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], p. 135) draws an interesting contrast between Noah’s speechless worship (Gen 9:20) and Abraham and Sarah’s use of words (Gen 15 – 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Janzen comments (*Social Meaning of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 238) that the only thing that interests the Chronicler about sacrifice apart from that it should be done in front of the covenant chest is “the Levitical praise that constantly accompanies sacrifice in the Chronicler’s eyes.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. Brueggemann, *Worship in Ancient Israel*, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. At least, it probably does, but LXX, Syr have “praise is fitting” (cf. EVV), a true and good though less striking point that requires considerable stretching of the meaning of the root with which they are linking the word *dāmâ* or *dûm*, “resemble.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, ii: 866. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cf. George Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. So Meyer Fortes, “Preface,” in M. F. C. Bourdillon and Meyer Fortes (ed.), *Sacrifice* (London/New York: Academic Press, 1980), pp. v-xix (p. xiv). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. Philip P. Jenson, *Graded Holiness* (JSOTSup 106; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), pp. 155-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Milgrom, *Numbers*, pp. 486-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Cf. Anson F. Rainey, “The Order of Sacrifices in Old Testament Ritual Texts,” *Biblica*  51 (1970): 485-98; Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: WJK, London: SPCK, 2000), pp. 123-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. TNIV reckons that this point is even more explicit as it translates Lev 1:9 “it is a burnt offering, a food offering [*’iššēh*], an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” In light of the existence of the word *’ēš* “fire,” *’iššēh* has usually been translated “offering by fire,” but this does not fit all occurrences, and Tg renders “presentation” while Akkadian and Ugaritic have a similar words for “gift” or “offering” (cf. John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* [WBC; Dallas: Word, 1992], pp. 13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Cf. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Milgrom, *Leviticus 1 – 16*, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Milgrom, *Leviticus 1 – 16*, pp. 704-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See *OTT* 2:123-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See further §6.2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Cf. Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, pp. 157, 172-73; Lester L. Grabbe, *Leviticus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 40; Roy Gane, *Cult and Character* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), pp. 106-43; also more broadly, N. Kiuchi, *The Purification offering in the Priestly Literature* (JSOTSup 56; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1 – 16*, pp. 301-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cf. Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual*, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Milgrom, *Leviticus 1 – 16*, pp. 365-78. I do not follow Milgrom in reckoning that in this context *’āšam* can mean “feel guilt” (cf. also Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience* [Leiden: Brill, 1976]). The notion of becoming aware of guilt is denoted by the use of the verb “know” (e.g., Lev 5:1-4) and it is the public confession (Lev 5:5) that evidences the change of intention. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See, e.g., *TWAT*; *NIDOTT*. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See, e.g., Hartley, *Leviticus*, pp. 64-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. S. R. Driver, “Propitiation,” in James Hastings (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Bible* (reprinted Edinburgh: Clark/New York: Scribner’s, 1947), 4:128-32 (p. 128); cf. Gane*, Cult and Character*, p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Cf. Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (London: Hodder/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See §2.2 “Diffidence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23 – 27* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 2417, 2418, following Philip D. Stern, *The Biblical* Herem (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1993), p. x. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See the discussion of execution in §4.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. M. F. C. Bourdillon, “Íntroduction,” in *Sacrifice*, pp. 1-27 (pp. 13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible* (New York/Oxford: OUP, 1993), p. 40, referring to Stern, *The Biblical* Herem. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See §4.1 “Thinking Exegetically.” [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek* (JSOTSup 43; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985); John Day, *Molech* (Cambridge/New York: CUP, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Cf. *DDD* “Malik.” On theories regarding Molek, see Hartley, *Leviticus*, pp. 333-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See further §6.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. See, e.g., Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel* (Leiden/New York: Brill, 1996), pp. 206-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)