

## Atonement in the Old Testament

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### Introduction

This paper is not a study of the word-root translated by 'atonement' terminology. There are good articles on that topic in the major Bible dictionaries and theological lexicons. Rather it is a broader reflection on how the OT portrays what has gone wrong in human life and what it means for people and situations to be 'put right'. Atonement language is one part of this 'putting right', but not the most prominent over all sections of the canonical traditions. Furthermore, the nature of the paper is to cover a broad sweep of material in different parts of the Old Testament canon, and this necessarily means that it lacks exegetical or reflective depth. My hope, however, in offering such a mere sketch is that it will motivate readers to explore specific themes or textual fields, in greater depth for themselves.

### A. The Problem

How does the OT describe the human predicament? Much more is needed than a simple word study on the various Hebrew terms for sin (though that is itself a significant and enlightening study). In broad terms, the OT portrays our predicament in terms of:

1. *A relationship that has been broken: The relational aspect*

The very first account of things going wrong between God and humanity would have to be described in these terms. In the narratives of Genesis 2-3, it is the relationship between all three parties (the man, the woman and God) that is questioned and then spoiled. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, relational metaphors for sin and its effects include adultery, and other strong pictures of betrayal and ingratitude, within a relationship that was meant to be built on love, trust, loyalty and commitment.

2. *The disturbance of shalom: The social aspect*

The narratives of Genesis 4-11 move on to describe inter-human disorder at every level: envy, violence, murder, corruption, vengeance, arrogance. The rest of the Old Testament adds to this list all the other social sins of greed, injustice, socio-economic oppression, abuse of the poor, women, etc. In relation to both of the above, one could add the ecological dimension, since our relationship with the earth is spoiled and the shalom that we should have enjoyed in our created environment is disturbed. The earth itself suffers because of human sin.

3. *Rebellion against authority: The covenantal aspect*

The earliest account of sin portrays it as an act of disobedient rebellion, but this aspect comes to prominence in relation to Israel. The first great apostasy of Israel after the exodus resulted literally in broken tablets of the law (Ex. 32-34). Sin among the redeemed people of God is portrayed (especially in the prophets), as disloyalty to the covenant Lord. This constitutes both apostasy and idolatry (cf. Jer. 2:13). Sin is brokenness.

#### 4. *Guilt that necessitates punishment: The legal aspect*

As early as Deuteronomy 32 the metaphor of the lawcourt is used in portraying the sin of Israel. Yahweh is Judge, Israel defendant. Forensic metaphors are used. This way of describing sin is also common in the prophets, using the language of offence, transgression, guilt and retributive justice.

#### 5. *Uncleanness and pollution: The ritual aspect*

Sin is portrayed as dirt and defilement. The 'abomination' language is also relevant to this aspect. This more ritual way of viewing the effects of sin is not confined to the priestly materials of Leviticus, however. It strongly influences the book of Ezekiel (who of course came from a priestly family). Ezekiel found many ways to communicate the disgusting, filthy, nature of sin (e.g. 4:12, 36:16-17). Using ritual metaphors, of course, did not mean he viewed sin as 'merely' ritual. Ezekiel uses priestly language, but the evils he refers to are a comprehensive and devastating list of personal and social wickedness (cf. ch. 22).

#### 6. *Shame and disgrace on oneself and/or on God: the emotional aspect*

The initial reaction to sin in the Garden of Eden was the desire to hide and be covered. Sin produces shame in the presence of others and of God – as it should. When sin becomes very advanced, even the shame-response is squashed, as Jeremiah observed when he spoke about people who could no longer blush (Jer. 6:15). But sin not only brings shame and disgrace on oneself, when it takes root and bears fruit among God's people it results in shame and disgrace on God – what Ezekiel called the profaning of God's name among the nations (Ezek. 36:16ff). Shame is a powerful psychological, social and cultural reality, and its relation to sin and guilt needs careful exploration

#### 7. *An accumulating burden: the historical aspect.*

The narratives of the Old Testament, from Genesis 4 onwards, show the accumulating effects of sin. Each generation builds on the sinful proclivities of the previous one. The sin of the Canaanites, for example, is recognized in Genesis. 15:16 as not yet having reached its full extent. Several generations later it is cited as justifying the judgment of God by the agency of the Israelites (Deut. 9:4-6; Lev. 18:24-28). The book of Judges embodies this message, and the interpretation of the exile in the Deuteronomic history is vivid portrayal of the accumulating historical weight of sin.

#### 8. *Death: The final aspect*

Death was threatened in Eden for disobedience, and indeed death invades human life very soon afterwards. But it is also recognized that death invades life long before we actually physically die – through the spoiling effects of disease, broken relationships, suffering, oppression, etc. The language of life and death, blessing and curse; destruction and blotting out, etc., is the constant accompaniment of the threats and the promises of the covenant relationship (cf. Deuteronomy passim, but especially ch. 30). Not surprisingly, Ezekiel, who graphically portrayed the death of exile, saw that the only solution lay in the resurrecting power of the Spirit of Yahweh.

Sin, then, in its broad Old Testament perspective has a devastatingly wide range of effects. It breaks our relationship with God, one another and the earth; it disturbs our peace; it makes us rebels against God's authority; it makes us guilty in God's court; it make us dirty in God's presence; it brings shame on ourselves and on others; it blights us from the past and already poisons the future; it leads us ultimately to destruction and death.

## B. The Patriarchs

How are things 'put right' in Genesis? The story of the fall introduces the problem. The rest of the book of Genesis shows a variety of ways in which God and human beings are involved in 'putting things right' – whether in an immediate crisis, or in longer term hope and expectation. Some of these are as follows:

1. *By divine grace, Gen. 8:21*

The Flood narrative begins and ends with God's grace. Noah 'found grace in the eyes of the LORD' (Gen. 6:8). The story then proceeds through divine rescue, covenant promise, and human *responsive* sacrifice. Initially, Noah does nothing but obey God's instructions. The saving work is entirely of God. The later act of sacrifice, however, is portrayed as integrally connected to the averting of God's wrath (the 'soothing aroma' that is characteristic of the effects of sacrifice in Leviticus) and the covenantal promise for the future that embraces all life on earth (8:20-22).

2. *By divine promise of blessing: Gen: 12:1-3*

In the context of the portrayal of the scattering of the nations and their rebellious arrogance, in Genesis 10 and 11, the promise of God to *bless* all the nations through Abraham and his descendants, is very good news indeed. 'Putting things right' for humanity will depend on God's will to bless, and in this text, God's blessing is anticipated to be individual, familial, national, and global.

3. *By faith: Gen. 15:6*

God's promise must be met by human faith, which is exactly Abraham's response. So the text explicitly declares that God counts this as righteousness for him. This verse stands as a key principle, of course, in later biblical theology of justification by grace through faith.

4. *By doing righteousness and justice: Gen:18:19*

The ethical dimension of the required human response is here articulated through divine soliloquy about the purpose of God himself. God reminds himself that his long-term goal is to bring about what he had promised Abraham – namely the blessing of all nations. To that end he had chosen Abraham. And to that end, Abraham and his household after him were to be a community that would 'keep the way of the LORD', by 'doing righteousness and justice'. These are strongly ethical phrases, and they stand in this verse as a fulcrum between election and mission.

5. *By prayer: Gen. 18, 20:17*

Abraham's remarkable intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah did not achieve the salvation of the cities, leading the reader to conclude that there cannot have been even ten righteous people there. But God's rescue of Lot and his family is explicitly put down to God 'remembering Abraham' (Gen. 19:29). The reader is also taught to believe, with Abraham, that any 'putting right' of things on earth depends on the twin foundational assumptions of Yahweh being 'Judge of all the earth', and that he will always 'do justice' (Gen. 18:25). Though counted righteous by God for his faith, Abraham was still a sinner, and several narratives feature his fallness. But even as such, he proves the power of prayer in putting things right for a pagan king whom he had deceived (Gen. 20:17).

6. *By obedience: Gen. 22, 26:4f.*

The culmination of the Abraham narratives comes in the profound story of the 'Binding of Isaac'. This test of his obedience climaxes in the strongest and fullest affirmation by God of his promise to Abraham and his intention to bless the nations through him. It now takes the form of an oath on God's own self. And it explicitly links the promise to the proven obedience of Abraham, stressing this connection by referring to this at the beginning and end of the

promise (Gen. 22:15-18). The final phrase is unequivocal: 'through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.' So, as we put the whole narrative of Abraham together, it affirms the integral nature of grace and promise, faith and obedience. The concluding phrase above cannot, of course, be construed as making God's promise conditional on works, or that Abraham has in any sense deserved his own salvation or anybody else's. The point is rather that God sovereignly builds Abraham's obedience, as demonstrating the reality of his faith, into the outworking of his own gracious promise to bless humanity.

Otherwise, apart from Gen. 8:21, although the patriarchs build altars, there is no clear picture of *sacrificial* atonement as a response to sin.

### C. The Passover

The Passover was a blood rite initially connected with the exodus as far as Israel's theology is concerned (whatever pre-Israelite history it may have had in rituals involving spring lambs). So our theological interpretation of it must be closely connected to the exodus, which stands as the Old Testament model *par excellence* of Yahweh acting in redemption to 'put things right'. At least three key elements are involved in Passover ritual and theology.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. *Protection from wrath and destruction.*

Though the vocabulary of atonement is not present, the sacrifice of a lamb is the central element. The blood ritual had an apotropaic force in protecting the Hebrew families from the wrath of the destroyer on the first-born throughout the land. So the effect of blood-sacrifice in the averting of judgment is clear.

#### 2. *Liberation from oppression*

Every celebration of the Passover focuses on this – the deliverance of the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. This happened according to God's promise and entirely by God's action. So the whole focus is on the work of God in redemption. But because this was entirely an act of God, it required an appropriate human response – as was built into the whole covenantal nature of the relationship. One dimension of this follows immediately:

#### 3. *Consecration to Yahweh*

Those whom God had redeemed from death were to regard themselves as now wholly consecrated to him. In the exodus, Yahweh was not so much merely liberating slaves (from Pharaoh) as reclaiming worshippers (his own). The sacrifice of all first-born animals, and the redemption of first-born sons was explicitly for the purpose of reminding the Israelites that every future generation belonged to Yahweh in perpetuity (Ex. 13:1-16). This is then carried forward into the demand that Israel should live in practical ethical holiness. So the Passover speaks not only of Yahweh's redemptive commitment to Israel, as demonstrated in history, but also of Israel's ethical commitment to Yahweh, to be demonstrated in life (cf. Ex. 19:6). The same dynamic is reflected in the combination of Passover and holiness imagery in 1 Peter 1-2, and in Paul's ethical use of the Passover tradition in 1 Cor. 5:6-8.

### D. The great apostasy

Exodus 32-34 records the great apostasy of the Golden Calf, during Moses' absence on Mt. Sinai. The situation was exceedingly serious, since God threatened immediate and total destruction of the whole people (Ex. 32:9-10). Moses recalls the event with horror, even forty years later, saying that God had been 'angry enough to destroy you (Dt. 9:8:19 – in a context

<sup>1</sup> See further, T. D. Alexander, 'The Passover Sacrifice' in Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (eds.), *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Carlisle: Paternoster, and Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), ch. 1, pp. 1-24.

that anticipated God's destruction of the nations in Canaan). How could such an awful breach in the covenant relationship be 'put right'? The narrative highlights a number of factors.

### 1. *Intercessory prayer*

The passionate prayer of Moses (Ex. 32:11-14, recalled in Deut. 9:25-29), appealed to three things:

- God's covenant promise to Abraham; God could not destroy Israel without breaking that promise and thereby acting inconsistently with his own character and being.
- God's Sinai covenant with Israel; as seen in the reminder that Israel is 'your people whom *you* brought up from Egypt'.
- God's name and reputation among the surrounding nations; what would they think of a God who rescues his people only to destroy them a few months later?

The implication of this prayer is that 'putting things right' depends entirely on God – his character, promises and name. This dynamic is reflected in the prophets when God declares that his future saving acts will be 'for my own sake' (e.g. Isa. 43:25; Ezek. 36:16-32).

### 2. *Punishment*

The people were spared from total immediate destruction, but they did not go unpunished. This is seen in the slaughter of some by the Levites, the outbreak of plague, and the grinding of the golden idol to be drunk by the people (though the Deuteronomic recollection adds the detail that it was flushed away in a stream; very likely both elements were involved – one punitive, the other purgative).

### 3. *Atonement*

Interestingly, on this occasion the vocabulary of atonement is used. Thus, in Ex. 32:30, Moses says to the people, 'You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement [*kipper*] for your sin.' In view of the fact that the predominant use of the *kipper* language comes in the context of the blood sacrifices in Leviticus, it is striking that Moses does *not* offer any sacrifice in seeking to avert God's threatened judgment – except for the remarkable self-offering that he proposes in 32:32. Rather he turns to prayer, and that indeed is atoningly effective. Perhaps there is some anticipation here of Psalm 51:16-17, that actually no sacrifice that Moses could offer could possibly have been adequate or appropriate. The only hope lay in a 'broken and contrite heart' and in the character and promises of God.

### 4. *The character of Yahweh*

In the context of God's withdrawal of the threat of judgment, restored commitment to go with the people, and a renewed covenant, Moses asks to know Yahweh even more closely. Yahweh's response takes the form of a revelation of his own name that became a key text throughout the rest of the Old Testament.

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (Ex. 34:6-7).

The paradox inherent in this self-description – namely that Yahweh is characterized by compassion, grace, love and faithfulness, and yet does not let sin go unpunished – was only finally resolved on the cross.

## E. The Priests and the Levitical system.

The language and concept of atonement abounds in Leviticus, and we need to consider two main aspects of it: in connection with the sacrifices, and the Day of Atonement.

### 1. The sacrifices

#### a) The meaning of *kipper*

There has been a prolonged debate over the best translation for the root *kpr* in its common Piel form, *kipper*.<sup>2</sup> Apart from a much less likely meaning, derived from an Arabic cognate, 'to cover over', there are two main candidates.

- *To ransom*. In Exodus 30:11-16, money is taken as 'atonement' or 'ransom' for the lives of Israelites counted in the census. And in Numbers 35:29-34, no ransom is allowed in exchange for the life of a convicted murderer. This also seems to be the likely meaning in Leviticus 17:11, where the blood of an animal is said to be its *nephesh*, or 'life', which 'God has given to make atonement' – i.e. as a ransom, or exchange, for the one who sacrifices it.

The exact same Hebrew form of words is used in Ex. 30:16 and Lev. 17:11 - 'to *kipper* for your lives'. That is, the money (in Ex. 30), or the animal blood (in Lev. 17) is an exchange, an equivalence, that provides a substitute for the life of the Israelite (in a census or as a sacrificing worshipper).

- *To wipe clean* (with an Akkadian cognate). In Jeremiah 18:23, *kipper* is parallel to 'blot out' (when Jeremiah prays that God will *not* do this with the sins of his persecutors). And this seem to be the commonest sense in Leviticus, where the word is frequently used in the rituals of purging or cleansing (e.g. of the tabernacle, persons, or various objects) though the manipulation of the blood of sacrifice.

Perhaps either meaning is possible, depending on the context, though probably the second is commonest. Sacrificial blood is the instrument of cleansing, which thus effects what is necessary for sin to be forgiven and wrath averted.

#### b) 'Soothing aroma'

Gordon Wenham argues cogently that this is a highly significant phrase, occurring frequently as it does in the early chapters of Leviticus, which indicates that sacrifice effects a change in God's attitude towards the worshipper. That is to say, this metaphor expresses a propitiatory, as well as an expiatory, function. Yes, sacrifice expiates; it cleanses away the sins and offences for which it is offered. But it does so precisely in order to avert the wrath that those sins and offences would otherwise inevitably incur. Two text groups make this meaning clear:

- Genesis 8:21. this is the first use of the phrase in the Hebrew Bible, and it refers to Noah's burnt offering. Wenham notes that the soothing aroma of that sacrifice did not, of course, prevent the flood, nor was it the instrument of saving Noah. However, it did precipitate God's benevolent and covenantal response that he would 'never again destroy' the earth. There is a strong contrast with Genesis 6:5, where the same description of endemic human sin is found. The change between God's words and acts in 6:5 and in 8:21 is integrally connected to Noah's sacrifice as a 'soothing aroma' and God's response to it.
- Leviticus 1:9, 2:2, 3:5, 4:31 – with reference to the burnt part of the respective sacrifices that are prescribed in these chapters. In all cases, the phrase, 'a soothing aroma', is closely linked to the declaration of *atonement* (i.e. the effect

<sup>2</sup> See the excellent discussion by Richard Averbeck, in Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.) *NIDOTTE* vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 689-710

on the sin or offence or uncleanness: it has been wiped away), and to the declaration of *forgiveness* (i.e. the effect on the sinner-worshipper).

All this matches the theology of Leviticus 17:11. What happens in sacrifice is God-given ('I have given it to you'), but it is also God-affecting. 'Putting things right', then, includes both a God-orientated and human-orientated dimension. Sacrifice both cleanses the worshipper, and 'soothes' the wrath of God. But inasmuch as the whole thing comes from God in the first place, it retains its character as grace, and cannot be construed as any kind of bargain, negotiation, or *do ut des* relationship.

c) Maintaining or restoring social order

Philip Jensen observes that sacrifice can function to initiate a fresh state of affairs that is desirable (e.g. the ordination of priests), or to correct a state of affairs that has degenerated (e.g. through pollution, sin, etc). Also it can function to restore and strengthen relationships – not only vertically with God, but also horizontally within families and the community (e.g. the fellowship offerings).<sup>3</sup> So, in line with what we observed about the nature of the human predicament in Section A above, including the disturbance of shalom, we need to see Old Testament language of atonement and sacrifice in much more than individual terms. It had social and even cosmic significance in its symbolism. It was the means of preventing the slide into chaos and disorder, of sustaining the boundaries and regularities of an ordered world. Something of this deeper meaning also pervades what Paul has to say about the cosmic significance of the 'blood of the cross' (e.g. in Col. 1:20).

d) Life and death

But sacrifice was not just about maintaining or restoring order; it was about resisting death and sustaining life. 'Sin and uncleanness lead a person from the realm of life into the realm of death. Sacrifice stops this process, indeed reverses it. It gives life to those doomed to die.'<sup>4</sup> God is the source of all life, so whatever was brought to him must be as perfect in its earthly life as possible, and all that was associated with death (corpses, discharges of the body, etc), must be cleansed away. Sin and uncleanness were to be treated seriously, and the sacrifices inculcated this attitude.

e) Special arrangements for the poor

Finally, however, it is worth noting the significance of Leviticus 5:7-13, where further regulations are made, in relation to the sin-offering, for those who could not afford the standard prescription of a lamb. They could bring two turtle doves instead. And if they could not afford even that, a few cups of flour would suffice. *And even this would still count as a sin offering!* That is, its atoning efficacy would be the same; the same words of atonement and forgiveness would be declared to the worshipper. Nothing could have made it more clear that the forgiveness of sin was entirely dependent on God and his grace – *not* on the size of the sacrifice, and not necessarily even on the presence of sacrificial blood, and least of all on the social or economic status of the worshipper. A poor Israelite who knew that he could come before God with nothing more than a few handfuls of flour, a contrite heart, and the spirit of true sacrificial confession, and then walk away with the words of forgiveness ringing in his ears, was learning something very profound about the nature of Yahweh God, and the meaning of divine grace.

## 2. *The Day of Atonement*

The Day of Atonement was an annual 'putting things right' for the whole community, in a highly symbolic way. The role of atoning blood in the four sacrifices involved was clearly to

<sup>3</sup> Philip P. Jensen, 'The Levitical Sacrificial System', in Beckwith and Selman, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, 'The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice', in Beckwith and Selman, p. 82.

cleanse everything that was associated with God in the sanctuary, and at the same time to cleanse the people from the uncleanness of accumulated sins.

In Leviticus 16:11-22, we can see a double movement involving the two goats.

- Spatially: there is movement from the Holy of Holies in the sanctuary (where the blood of the sacrificed goat is taken), to the wilderness (where the live goat is driven off).
- Spiritually: there is movement from the holiest presence of God to its demonic opposite ('Azazel').

Space has a quality as well as a quantity in the priestly writings, and the two goats eventually encompass the extreme reaches of significant space in the priestly worldview. The blood of one goat reaches to the heart of holy space, whereas the other is driven out to where major impurities have their proper place (cf. Nu.5:1-3).<sup>5</sup>

Atonement [sc. on the Day of Atonement] reaches right to the heart of God and propels sin to the furthest part of the earth. Cleansing coes from an act of God in his dwelling place and leads to the removal of the problem as far away as it is possible to conceive.<sup>6</sup>

The effect of the whole complex ritual was to restore harmony between God and Israel. So the effect was not solely atoning, but restorative.

The movement of the goats represents, or even effects, the re-establishment of the normative world order, thus allowing normal offerings to be resumed.<sup>7</sup>

All of the above speaks of a comprehensive response to sin and its effects. 'Putting things right' in the Levitical system was far from narrowly individual or private. Rather, it was a system that tackled the effects of sin and uncleanness in every area of life, every dimension of space, every relationship in the community. The overarching objective was to sustain or restore the normative pattern of healthy relationships, in personal, social and spiritual wholeness, cleanness and forgiven-ness.

## F. The Prophets

Space precludes a detailed account of each prophet's characteristic 'slant' on sin and its solution, but a few salient points may be mentioned.

### 1. *Sharp perception of sin*

Undoubtedly we owe to the great prophets of Israel a sharper, deeper and clearer perception of what sin is and does – a perception which complements the narrative portrayal in the historical books. They expose both specific individual wickedness, and general social ills. They put a sharp spotlight on specific events and actions that breach covenant loyalty, but also highlight endemic and structuralized injustice and oppression.

### 2. *Rejection of corrupt sacrificial ritual.*

The prophets could not tolerate sacred rites in the context of social wrongs. There could be no 'putting things right' with God by shallow cultic exuberance unless there were corresponding

<sup>5</sup> Jensen, 'Levitical Sacrificial System', p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Derek Tidball, *The Message of Leviticus* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), p. 196

<sup>7</sup> Jensen, *loc.cit.*

efforts to put things right horizontally within society. This is a fundamentally covenantal understanding of both relationships. So the famous passages in which prophets vigorously reject the cultic activity of priests and worshippers should not be seen as hostility towards sacrifice and other rituals of Israel's worship in and of themselves, but rather as a rejection of the worship of *these people*, in their persistent wickedness.<sup>8</sup> Moral obedience is thus prioritized over cultic observance – a point fully endorsed by Jesus himself.

### 3. *The necessity of repentance*

Jeremiah, perhaps more than any, called for the people to make a radical 'turn' away from sin and back towards God – in his repeated use of the verb *sub*, in its multiple forms. (See especially Jer. 3, 4, 7, etc). Joel 2:12-17 provides a powerful litany on what true repentance means, while Ezekiel's appeals reach evangelistic levels in Ezekiel 18:30-32; 33:10-11.

### 4. *Covenant restoration*

'Putting things right' for the prophets meant primarily the restoration of the broken covenant. For this various metaphors were employed, such as a restored marriage (Hosea, Isaiah 50, 54), or restored relationship between parent and child (Jer. 31:9, 20). Ultimately, only a fully renewed covenant relationship would suffice, in which the original covenant realities would be fully guaranteed and experienced – wholehearted obedience, knowledge of God, assured relationship, complete forgiveness (Jer. 31:33-34).

### 5. *Dependence on grace*

Ezekiel, who had the most severe portrayals of sin among all the prophets, also achieves the greatest insight into the miraculous grace of God. Any hope for Israel in exile flows only from God's will that they should live, not from any merit or potential of their own. His grace can purge the past, if they will acknowledge their guilt and turn from their wickedness (Ezek. 18:30-32; 30:10-11). His grace, meeting with practical repentance, can effect cleansing, regeneration, and new heart and spirit, and strength for obedience (Ezek. 36: 24-28). But in the end, nothing short of resurrection, through the life-giving power of God's Spirit, will suffice (Ezek. 37).

### 6. *'For the sake of my name'*

Another emphasis of Ezekiel is that when God 'puts things right' for Israel, it will have global effects. For not only Israel, but all the nations, will come to know the living God for who he truly is. 'Then you (or they) will know that I am the LORD' is virtually Ezekiel's signature tune – it is a phrase that occurs about 80 times in his book. And it draws our attention to an essentially missional dimension in this whole matter. God's acts of grace and forgiveness have a revelatory purpose. God wills to be known to the nations, not merely as the judge before whom they stand (or flee), but as the saviour to whom they can and must turn for salvation (cf. Isa. 45:22).

### 7. *'By my righteous servant'*

In Isaiah 40-55, Yahweh alone is the God who 'puts things right', for 'there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Saviour' (Isa. 45:21) and 'in the LORD alone are righteousness and strength' (Isa. 45:24). So salvation and forgiveness comes from the sheer grace of Yahweh and his choice to forgive and blot out transgressions (Isa. 43:25). But the anticipated vehicle or agent of this saving work of God will be the Servant of the LORD, whose vicarious suffering and death will 'bear' the iniquities of those who, having once thought that he was suffering under the judgment of God for his own sin, now realize that it was actually *our* sorrows, transgressions, iniquities and sins that were laid upon him. The language of sacrificial substitution, and of vicarious sin-bearing runs through Isaiah 53 unmistakably.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. Amos 5:21-25; Hos. 6:6; Isa. 1:10-17; Mic. 6:6-8; Jer. 6:19-20; 7:21-23.

## G. The Psalms

In the Book of Psalms, of course, we see Israel at worship. So it is here that we will find how Israelites in the presence of God thought about sin and about how things could be put right. The following brief points stand out<sup>9</sup>.

1. There is a remarkable paradox, that on the one hand, we find a deeply penitential awareness of sin in several Psalms, yet on the other hand, an almost total absence of reference to atoning sacrifice. The sin-offering is mentioned once – but even then only to reject it! (Ps. 40)
2. Sacrifices of various sorts are frequently mentioned, but broadly in contexts of thanksgiving, praise, or joy in the communion of worship. That is to say, the sacrifices normally referred to in the Psalms are those that express what God has already done for the worshipper, or in anticipation of what God is being asked to do; not in relation to confession of sin or guilt.
3. In fact, on several occasions sacrifice is decisively ‘relativized, or at put in the context of other perspectives. Thus Ps 40:6 and 51:16 state that sacrifices are not what God desires, but rather obedience and contrition. And Ps. 50:8-16 argues with intentional irony, that while God is happy to receive the sacrifices of his people, the fact is that we cannot give him anything that does not already belong to him, he certainly needs no feeding at our hands, and we cannot influence him by such means to overlook covenant wickedness.
4. Accordingly, ‘putting things right’ is once more seen as entirely a matter of God’s good character and grace. Psalmists frequently plead for forgiveness, cleansing, pardon, protection, renewal of life, etc. But this is done entirely on the basis of God’s mercy, compassion, righteousness, or promise – never as the expected ‘product’ or ‘benefit’ of a sacrifice that has been made or promised. We may assume that the Israelites who wrote and sang these Psalms were devout men and women who *were* in fact bringing their sacrifices to the sanctuary, in cultic as well as ethical obedience. But they never *appeal* to them as grounds for God’s favour, but rather only to the character and word of God himself. That is to say, the Book of Psalms does not *deny* Leviticus. But, while assuming it, points beyond it to the known mercy and grace of God, and indeed ultimately anticipates Hebrews in recognizing the inadequacy of all animal sacrifice in contrast to the only and all-sufficient adequacy of the self-sacrifice of Christ.

### For further reading:

Richard Averbeck, ‘*kpr*’, in Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.) *NIDOTTE* vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 689-710

Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (eds.), *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Carlisle: Paternoster, and Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

Philip Jensen, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (JSOT Supp106, Sheffield, 1992);

Derek Tidball, *The Message of Leviticus*, BST (Leicester: IVP), 2005

G.J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979)

<sup>9</sup> See further, Nigel Courtman, ‘Sacrifice in the Psalms’, in Beckwith and Selman, pp. 41-58.