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Author(s): Bair, Melanie.

Source: *Princeton Theological Review*, vol. 13, no.2 (Fall 2007), pp. 61-72.

Published by: Princeton Theological Seminary.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/196>

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LIFE IS IN THE BLOOD: ENVISIONING ATONEMENT WITH REGARDS TO LEVITICAL THEOLOGY

Melanie Bair

The doctrine of atonement, central to the Christian faith since the days of Augustine, has focused much attention on the atoning work of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Despite this Christocentric approach, the theme of atonement predates Christ's work and is pervasive through much of the Old Testament text, with especial concentration in the book of Leviticus. While appeals are not often made to the Levitical text when constructing a doctrine of the atonement, I argue that Leviticus serves as a vital resource for exploring the broad meaning of the atonement.¹ The theme of reconciliation between people and their God which is found in Levitical accounts of atonement offers a fresh theological perspective that can be applied when constructing a post-resurrection atonement theory.

Many Christian atonement theories are constructed to revolve around New Testament formulations of the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and while it is necessary for contemporary Christians to make Jesus central in any formulation of atonement theology, it is also vital to recognize the role that atonement played in the lives of religious practitioners prior to Jesus. In fact, the process of atonement discussed in Leviticus exposes a vision of atonement that is often absent from purely Christocentric formulations. Thus, an examination of Levitical conceptions of atonement proves to be enlightening when formulating an atonement theory that is able to account for the inconceivable work of grace that occurs when humans, in all of their sin and depravity, are reconciled to a just and perfect God.

This reconciling work of atonement is a pivotal point in the law of the Torah. As John Hartley recognizes, the procedures concerning the Day of Atonement found in Leviticus 16 are located centrally in the book of Leviticus even as the book itself is located in the center of the Pentateuch. Hartley suggests that the literary placement of these procedures "highlights the importance of this solemn day for the Israelite community."² Thus, the position of the specifications regarding the Day of Atonement in the text suggests to Hartley that the theological concept of the atonement was of great significance to the people for whom this atonement was made.³ Deborah Rooke also recognizes the importance of the

1 I look forward to continuing conversations with Dr. Sharon Baker whose forthcoming book entitled *B(u)y Grace?* explores many of the ways in which Leviticus 17:11 can inform atonement theology.

2 John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, vol. 4, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 217.

3 It is both fascinating and disappointing that the importance of the atonement

ritual and the theology of atonement for the Israelite community. Rooke observes that “[the laws of the Day of the Atonement] are clearly the jewel in the crown of the Priestly torah.”⁴ Thus the Day of Atonement has a special status among the rituals and ceremonies described in Leviticus.

The Day of Atonement was especially significant for the community because of the universal accessibility to the ceremony. Unlike many of the more individualized sacrificial rituals, the Day of Atonement was intended to serve the entire community. R. K. Harrison notes that “high priests and laymen alike had offended against God’s holiness, and therefore atonement was needed by everybody.”⁵ As Leviticus 16:34 affirms, the Day of Atonement was meant to provide atonement for *all* of the sins of Israel.

Even in addition to the Day of Atonement itself, other sacrificial rituals were established by the Levitical laws that aimed to provide atonement for sins. Leviticus 5 specifies the procedures for making atonement for certain sins. The procedures described there are significant because of the flexibility that they demonstrate in providing atonement for all members of the community. The text describes a sliding scale of sacrificial payment whereby a lamb is the preferred sacrificial animal, but in the case that a lamb is unaffordable, the penitent one is permitted to sacrifice two turtle-doves or two pigeons (Lev. 5:7). In the case that even this is too burdensome a price, the text makes a provision for a tenth of an ephah of flour to serve as an offering that will make atonement for sins that have been committed (Lev. 5:11,13). Thus, as Terry Briley observes, “no one is to be excluded economically from the process of atonement.”⁶ The Torah’s emphasis on atonement is so profound that it appears that the actual offering used to make the atonement is not as important as the penitent one’s step to seek atonement through an offering. Ultimately, the significance of the act lies in the individual’s *desire* for atonement.

The individual seeking atonement must also collaborate with the priestly leadership. In the sacrificial rituals and the Day of Atonement, the high priest plays a significant role in mediating the ceremonies of atonement. Rooke suggests that the Day of Atonement specifically served as a yearly ritual for the high priest

has been largely lost in lay Christianity today. Even where this significance has not been abandoned, however, it seems that ideas of the atonement are limited to New Testament conceptions of the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. While the Christian must certainly place primacy on these events, New Testament texts cannot be viewed in a vacuum. Rather, a reading of Jesus’ atoning work in the context of the atonement in Leviticus will lead to a deeper understanding of the concept of the atonement.

4 Deborah Rooke, “The Day of Atonement as a Ritual of Validation for the High Priest,” in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 342.

5 R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 176.

6 Terry Briley, “The Old Testament ‘Sin Offering’ and Christ’s Atonement,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 3 no. 1 (2000): 96.

in which his status as high priest was affirmed.⁷ Thus, this ceremony served functions for both the people as recipients of atonement, and the high priest as a religious leader. The high priest's role in officiating the ceremony was a major aspect of the drama associated with the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 16:2 clearly states that if Aaron, the high priest, enters the sanctuary "just at any time... he will die."⁸ On the Day of Atonement, however, the high priest is given instructions to enter this holy sanctuary. As Jacob Milgrom recognizes, this action implies that the high priest is literally *risking his life* in order to perform the ceremony.⁹ Ultimately, the Day of Atonement presents a drama in which it becomes clear to the people that atonement can be dangerous.

The high priest's permission to enter the sanctuary is explicit, but in the description of both the sacrifices and the ceremonial rituals of the Day of Atonement, the manner in which the offerings are atoning for the sin of the one providing them is not specified. Harrison suggests that "Leviticus teaches that atonement for sin must be by substitution."¹⁰ Harrison's idea is plausible insofar as it seems to correspond with the scapegoat ritual in which Aaron, the high priest, is to place both of his hands upon the scapegoat's head and confess all of the iniquities of the people over it (Lev. 16:21). After being thus imbued with the sins of the people, the goat is taken and released into the wilderness (Lev. 16:22). This procedure would seem to indicate that the goat is acting as a substitute for the people and accepting the punishment (i.e., exclusion from community) that was intended for the people because of their sin.

John Goldingay differs from Harrison in his approach to how the sacrificial offerings function as a means of atoning for the sins of the people. He recognizes that "there is indeed a sense in which the offering substitutes for the offerer, though it is not that the offering is vicariously punished."¹¹ Thus, for Goldingay, there is a sense in which the sacrifice is substituting for the human person, but he draws a distinction between this sense of substitution and the idea that the animal is, in fact, being punished in lieu of the person. While this understanding of atonement is helpful in that it does not require that God be imagined in violent terms, the element of substitution that remains could be problematic. If justice is imagined as the transfer of status from animal to human, imagining that a single animal could be an adequate substitute for the great sins of humanity is incompatible with the idea that in order to establish "justice," restitution must be made for every iniquity.

In response to the problems of this substitutionary theory of atonement, J. S. Whale proposes that the idea that the sacrifice was actually made in substitution for the sinner is inadequate and incorrect. Whale observes that a penal substitution

7 Rooke, "Atonement as Ritual," 345.

8 All Bible quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

9 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 162.

10 Harrison, *Leviticus*, 31.

11 John Goldingay, "Old Testament Sacrifice and the Death of Christ," in *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK, 1995), 10.

theory of atonement whereby atonement is effected through the vicarious punishment of a sacrifice “is quite foreign to the Bible.”¹² Whale points to the flexibility of the procedures for a sin offering suggested in Leviticus 5 to support his claim that the sacrifices did not serve as a substitution for the one who was offering them. He notes that in the case of the impoverished person who is only able to make an offering of a tenth of an ephah of flour, “you cannot punish a cupful of barley.”¹³ Likewise, Whale suggests that the prophetic critiques¹⁴ of the sacrificial system suggest that the idea of punishment was not the primary purpose of the sacrifices, and one should not imagine that atonement is achieved through vicarious punishment.

While there is scholarly disagreement on this issue, following Whale I suggest that especially when considering the prophetic critiques of the sacrificial system, the atonement that penitent worshippers receive is not a result of the punishment that is endured by the sacrifice that they bring. In fact, in the case of the needy person who is only able to bring some flour as a sacrifice, it does not follow that this person does not receive atonement simply because no punishment has been enacted or blood has been spilled.

The relationship between the blood of death and life that is found in the Levitical rendering of the atonement is also intimately related to the means by which atonement is effected. In exploring this issue, Whale suggests that it is vital that a distinction be made between the death of the animal which is sacrificed and the death of the human. The animal, Whale notes, “is never contaminated with the sin of him who offers it,” while humans are “sinful, unholy, and the bearer[s] of sin’s penalty in the doom of death...On the annual Day of Atonement [this categorical difference] is solemnly and dramatically emphasized.”¹⁵ Thus, during the ceremony of sacrificing one goat and sending the other goat out into the wilderness to Azazel, the Israelites would be prime spectators of a physical drama that illustrated the spiritual nature of the atonement which they were receiving. As J. D. G. Dunn recognizes, the use of the two goats creates a more comprehensive picture of the spiritual reality of the ceremony. Dunn asks,

Is it not more likely that the two goats were seen as part of the one ritual, representing more fully and pictorially what one goat could not? Perhaps, indeed, part of the significance of the Day of Atonement ritual was that the physical removal of the sins of the people out of the camp by the second goat demonstrated what the sin-offering normally did with their sins anyway – sin-offering and scapegoat being taken as two pictures of the one reality.¹⁶

12 J. S. Whale, *Victor and Victim* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 52.

13 Ibid., 53.

14 Isaiah 1:11; Hosea 6:6, 9:4; Jeremiah 6:20; Amos 5:21-24; cf. Psalm 40:6, 51:16; Proverbs 21:3

15 Whale, *Victor and Victim*, 73-74.

16 J. D. G. Dunn, “Paul’s Understanding of the Death of Jesus as Sacrifice,” in

The Israelites would have been very aware that their lives were spared. The goat that is sacrificed is said to make atonement only for the sanctuary and the uncleanness that it has supposedly incurred as a result of being among sinful people (Lev. 16:16). This action likely raised a question in the Israelites' minds: how many animals must die to purify a person if an innocent animal must die just to purify a *building*? It is here that one witnesses the absurd and irrational grace of the atonement: the sins of the people are laid upon the scapegoat, and it is *simply set free* (Lev. 16:22)! Emile Nicole recognizes that it is highly significant that the scapegoat "represented the removal of sin, the sins being symbolically placed on the animal that took them away *into* the desert."¹⁷ Though the sanctuary required blood to be cleansed, the scapegoat released on the Day of Atonement proclaims that a violent ceremony of death is not required for the people to experience atonement. Rather, merely an acknowledgement and confession of sin is required for atonement to be made (Lev. 16:10, 21).

Although this vision of atonement as the releasing of sins seems helpful in light of the problems of the substitutionary model of atonement discussed above, not all scholars agree on this point. Harrison believes that "only as atonement is linked with death, represented by shed blood, and not life set free, would it appear to become efficacious in the covering of human sin."¹⁸ While the shedding of blood that permeates many of the Levitical atonement procedures seems to suggest that blood was a necessary component of atonement, Harrison fails to adequately address how the scapegoat would be able to provide atonement for the people even though it sheds no blood.¹⁹

Likewise, Harrison does not address the problems that the prophetic critiques of the sacrificial system²⁰ present to his theory that only blood is capable of atoning for human sin. By Harrison's reading, it would seem that the prophetic word, which suggests that the Lord is unsatisfied with sacrifices that are brought in the midst of the people doing injustice, carries the implication that the Lord will no longer provide atonement to the people. If, as Harrison argues, atonement is only effective insofar as it is linked to death and the prophets are correct that the Lord is not pleased with sacrifices, then atonement can no longer occur. Followed

Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology, ed. S. W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 45.

17 Emile Nicole, "Atonement in the Pentateuch," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, eds. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 45. The emphasis here emphasizes the goat's *entrance* rather than *exit*.

18 Harrison, *Leviticus*, 182.

19 Lev. 16:10 makes it clear that the scapegoat is presented "*alive* before the Lord to make atonement over it" (*italics mine*).

20 In many cases, the prophetic critique of the sacrificial system is coupled with the criticism that a lack of justice within the society voids the meaning behind the sacrifice such that it becomes an empty ritual. Thus, this twofold condemnation suggests not only a prophetic concern for justice, but also an acknowledgement of the potential inefficacy of the sacrifice as such.

to its logical end, Harrison's argument would indicate that in the times when the Lord is displeased with sacrifice, atonement is not even possible. However, this message seems incompatible with the portrait of God found elsewhere in the Bible. The prophetic message of Jeremiah 31:31-34 demonstrates the Lord's willingness to accommodate to his people. The Lord recognizes that the people have broken the Sinai covenant, but rather than abandoning them, the Lord promises a new covenant in which the law will be written in the hearts of the people (Jer. 31:33).

In light of the Lord's flexibility in working with an obstinate, stubborn, and sinful people, I suggest that Harrison's notion that atonement can be achieved only through the shedding of blood is incorrect. Rather than following the implication of Harrison's suggestion that with the prophetic critique the Lord revokes the gift of atonement because of the claim that the Lord is displeased with the sacrifices that the people bring, I suggest that the Lord's great flexibility with people suggests that atonement is still possible, even in the midst of the despised sacrifices.

The most notable exception to Harrison's idea that atonement is mediated through sacrifice is the scapegoat ritual which is central to the atonement drama. The idea of ridding the community of evil was not uncommon in the ancient world, and numerous scholars have recognized similar ceremonies in other ancient near-eastern cultures. Milgrom suggests that the releasing of the scapegoat into the wilderness mirrors Mesopotamian elimination rites in which "an object that is selected to draw the evil from the affected person is consequently disposed of."²¹ Likewise, Hartley notes that in Ugarit and among the Hittites there were "riddance rites" that had parallels with the scapegoat ritual of the Day of Atonement.²² Gordon Wenham emphasizes that the removal of the scapegoat from the Israelite camp would have been a vivid illustration of the fact that the ceremony was removing the sins of the people.²³

21 Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 166. Milgrom notes, however, that the correspondence between these Mesopotamian rites and the scapegoat ritual of the Day of Atonement disintegrates insofar as there is no evidence of transfers of evil or impurity from an entire group of people in other Mesopotamian practices.

22 Hartley, *Leviticus*, 218.

23 Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 233. Wenham also stresses that the sins are left in the desert because the desert is an unclean place. I suggest that the conclusion that the desert is an unclean place is mistaken. The biblical narrative records numerous heroes of faith (including Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus, etc.) who received their training and preparation for their ministry within the desert. Thus, unless Wenham is prepared to dismiss these great men as "unclean," he would do well not to make the assertion that simply because the unclean sins of the people that have been laid upon the scapegoat are carried to the desert, that the desert itself is necessarily an unclean place. By Wenham's logic, he would also have to make the assumption that the *sanctuary itself* would be unclean because it receives the blood of the slaughtered bull that serves to make atonement for the high priest and his household (Lev. 16:11). I would suggest that in light of the portrait of the desert that is painted elsewhere in the biblical narrative, it may be helpful to imagine that the sins themselves are being sent to the desert for "training" in

In order to further explore the meaning of atonement in this text, a brief examination of the Hebrew verb *kipper*, which is often translated using the English word “atone,” is helpful for understanding how the Day of Atonement as described in Leviticus 16 may have been understood. Fred Needham recognizes that *kipper* seems to carry a wide range of meanings that include ideas of cleansing, sanctifying, and purifying.²⁴ Likewise, Budd recognizes that *kipper* describes the process and purpose of cleansing, and its use in Leviticus 16:30 implies a cleansing of not only the sanctuary but also of Israel herself.²⁵ Taking a slightly different approach, John Kleinig suggests that *kipper*, at least as it is used in Leviticus 17:11 which describes the role of blood in making atonement for people, is used as “a technical term for the application of blood on the altar for burnt offering.”²⁶ The connection that Kleinig draws between the ideas of atonement and blood in Leviticus 17:11 are worthy of attention, especially in light of the idea that the scapegoat was able to provide atonement without the shedding of blood.

Leviticus 17:11 proclaims, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.” This verse seems to suggest that atonement is possible only through the shedding of blood. However, this verse provides significant difficulties for both translating and interpreting. Nicole notes that one of the most problematic features of the verse is the preposition בְּ . It is not clear if this is a “ בְּ of price,” “ בְּ of instrument,” or “ בְּ of essence.”²⁷ Thus, the precise meaning of this preposition is unclear and leads to the related problem of how to imagine the relationship between the blood and the life that is said to be present within the blood.

Several scholars have attempted to uncover the relationship between the blood and the life to which this verse alludes. Hartley suggests the cleansing power of the blood is not from the blood itself, but from the life within the blood. The blood simply “serves as the tangible center of an animal’s life force.”²⁸ Budd also recognizes that blood serves as an effective “purifying or ransoming agent” because of its “life-embodiment power.”²⁹ Thus, the blood appears to be able to effect atonement because of the life that it contains.

This explanation of why blood is necessary for atonement provides a helpful perspective on the role of blood in offering atonement. Many formulations of

becoming righteousness. The failure of the scapegoat/sin to return to the Israelite camp may suggest, then, that these sins and iniquitous patterns of behavior have failed by the standards of faith that the desert requires in order to survive its harsh conditions. Thus, the Israelites may be asked to see in this event the truth that their sinful actions cannot survive the standard of faith that desert life requires.

24 Fred Needham, “Atonement in the Ritual Covenants,” in *Stimulus* 8 no. 2 (May 2000): 38.

25 Budd, *Leviticus*, 236.

26 John W. Kleinig, “The Blood for Sprinkling – Atoning Blood in Leviticus and Hebrews,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 33 no 3 (1999): 129.

27 Nicole, “Atonement in the Pentateuch,” 36.

28 Hartley, *Leviticus*, 276.

29 Budd, *Leviticus*, 249.

atonement theories include the idea that somehow atonement requires the shedding of blood *for its own sake*. Leviticus 17:11, however, seems to suggest that blood is necessary for atonement (at least in the Levitical context) because it alone holds the life, the *nephesh*, that is the *real* ingredient necessary for atonement. Thus, a sacrificial ceremony that can appear to be focusing on the death of a creature may be far more focused on the life that the creature gives in order to bring about atonement.³⁰ Briley agrees that “God designated blood as the means of atonement because of its inherent connection with life.”³¹

The idea that atonement is realized through the presence of life, or *nephesh*, leads to the notion that atonement might be viewed as a process of reconciliation whereby the *nephesh* of God is reconciled to the *nephesh* of humans through an intermediary *nephesh*. John Hayes takes up the idea of the restorative and reconciling power of atonement, and he suggests that the theology and atonement rituals of Leviticus are “rituals of restoration and reintegration which participate in and mirror the return to established order and normalcy.”³² Taking a different approach to the idea of atonement as being a form of reconciliation, Needham recognizes that the semantic history of the word “atonement” has moved from a meaning of “at one-ment” to the idea of “reconciliation, meaning the making of unity and harmony.”³³ Thus, it is likely that atonement can refer to a process of reconciliation. More specifically, however, I argue that atonement describes reconciliation both in the human/God relationship *and* in human/human relationships.

The idea that atonement is related to the relationship between humans and God is pervasive in most formulations of an atonement theory. The notion that atonement is intimately connected with the process of reconciliation in human relationships has been less commonly explored in the history of Christian theology. The previous examination of Leviticus, however, points decisively in the direction of the importance of reconciliation to atonement. As Colin Gunton recognizes, the primary problem that atonement must correct is the problem of separation between the human and the divine through human sin. “To talk of sin is to talk of a way in which the world is affected by a breach in relationships between hu-

30 At this point, it may be helpful to recall that according to the previous exploration of Leviticus 5 in which atonement could be made through an offering of fine flour, atonement may not always require blood and the *nephesh* that it contains. In this case, one might imagine a more intimate role for God in the process of atonement as the provider of the necessary *nephesh*. In the creation account found in the second chapter of Genesis, the Lord God is said to breathe into the first man the “breath of life” (Gen. 2:7). After receiving this divine in-breathing, the man becomes a *nephesh*-filled being. Thus, it is clear that God is the ultimate author of the very *nephesh* that is necessary to achieve atonement, and in the case of the impoverished person making an offering of flour, the Lord could easily provide the necessary divine *nephesh* necessary for atonement.

31 Briley, “Old Testament,” 97.

32 John H. Hayes, “Atonement in the Book of Leviticus,” *Interpretation* 52 no. 1 (Jan. 1998): 6.

33 Needham, “Atonement,” 37.

mankind and our creator.”³⁴ In other words, sin is devastating insofar as it causes separation between the human *nephesh* and the divine *nephesh*. Briley diagnoses a similar problem related to human sins. He writes, “the sins of Christians have a devastating effect on both a personal and corporate relationship with God.”³⁵ In other words, the separation caused by sin is the primary human dilemma.

Porter suggests that this problem of separation is one of the underlying human problems that the Levitical priestly theology attempts to correct. In fact, he notes that one of the emphases of this priestly theology is its “insistence on the keeping of the commandments of the law as ensuring a right relationship with God.”³⁶ It is fascinating to observe, however, that these very commandments that were intended to keep humans in a state of reconciliation with God were authored *by God*. Kevin Seasoltz rightly recognizes that the process of atonement is an action of God directed toward creatures rather than a human action directed toward God.³⁷ Thus, the reconciliation of the human *nephesh* to the divine *nephesh* is initiated by the author of *nephesh*.

Just as atonement implies reconciliation between humans and God, it also encompasses the necessary reconciliation in interpersonal human relationships. Levine suggests that the process of atonement between humans and God is related to the process of atonement and reconciliation within human relationships. Of the procedures for the Day of Atonement described in Leviticus 16, Levine writes, “we observe a dynamic interaction between the priesthood/community, on the one hand, and the omnipresence of God, on the other.”³⁸ In other words, the process of atonement seems to have implications for both human/God relationships and human/human relationships. Likewise, Hayes recognizes, “through restitution a proper and normal relationship (*shalom*) is restored between the two parties, the victim and the perpetrator of the misconduct.”³⁹ In the same way that a victim/offender relationship can exist between God and humans, it can also exist within human relationships, and thus, it requires the same act of atonement through reconciliation that is required in the relationship between the human and the divine. The importance of atonement for achieving reconciliation in the context of human relationships is of inestimable value. In fact, Rooke believes that “the continuing well-being of the community is dependent on the successful performance of the [atonement] ceremony.”⁴⁰

The centrality of atonement rituals to the Levitical text is evident. As one moves to the New Testament, the idea of atonement remains a prominent theme, and it serves the reader well to draw from knowledge of the role of atonement in

34 Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 139.

35 Briley, “Old Testament,” 101.

36 J.R. Porter, *Leviticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 9.

37 Kevin R. Seasoltz, “Another Look at Sacrifice,” *Worship* 74 no. 5 (2000): 397.

38 Levine, *Leviticus*, 99-100.

39 Hayes, “Atonement,” 11.

40 Rooke, “Day of Atonement,” 353.

the Levitical texts when examining the role of atonement in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Nicole observes, “a proper understanding of the relationship between the two testaments implies that one should not try to find the New Testament in the Old, but to read the signs in the Old Testament that point in the direction of the New.”⁴¹ Thus, I seek to draw parallels between the theology of atonement as it is explored in Leviticus and the ultimate atonement achieved in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The ceremony of the Day of Atonement, in particular, is helpful in constructing a theory that is able to bridge both Old and New Testament understandings. Seasoltz has recognized that there is no doubt that New Testament writers draw upon Old Testament conceptions of the atonement, specifically the theological ideas connected to the Day of Atonement.⁴² Hartley takes this idea even further in suggesting that Jesus “fulfilled the entire intent of the high Day of Atonement. In fact, because Jesus was both the perfect high priest and an offering free from blemish, his death consummated the entire OT sacrificial system.”⁴³ Ultimately, then, Jesus performed the decisive ceremony of atonement such that it no longer required the constant repetition of Levitical procedures.

The idea from Leviticus that the power of the atonement is in the *nephesh* that is present in the blood, rather than simply the blood itself, has profound implications for a post-resurrection theory of atonement. As McHugh notes, “the slaughtering of an animal was not of the essence of sacrifice even in the Old Testament (for example, the bird in Lev. 14:52-3 and the scapegoat in 16:6-10, 20-22) only the offering of it to God.”⁴⁴ This serves to emphasize the idea that blood was only a requirement for the atonement insofar as it contained the *nephesh*, the *real* requirement for atonement. Thus, the focus of God’s atoning work is on the God-breathed *nephesh*, not on death or the idea that God demands the blood of punishment as payment for grievous human sin.

The implications of the atonement theology found in Leviticus for post-resurrection thinking about the atonement is that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are found to serve the purpose of the intermediary *nephesh* that is able to create reconciliation between the human *nephesh* and the divine *nephesh*. Hartley explains that since Jesus fulfills the role of “the boundary between the holy and the sinful, here humans may find forgiveness of all their sins and reconciliation with God.”⁴⁵ Likewise, Gunton recognizes that the *nephesh* that serves as the vehicle of atonement is from God. “The life that is given is the life of God himself, the incarnate Son dying for the life of the world.”⁴⁶

Ultimately, Jesus fulfills all of the roles required by the Day of the Atonement.

41 Nicole, “Atonement,” 49.

42 Seasoltz, “Sacrifice,” 399.

43 Hartley, *Leviticus*, 244.

44 J. F. McHugh, “The Sacrifice of the Mass at the Council of Trent,” in *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology*, ed. S. W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 164.

45 Hartley, *Leviticus*, 245.

46 Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 138.

ment as it is specified in Leviticus 16. He serves as the high priest who must risk his life in order to bring about atonement and reconciliation. Jesus also serves as the sacrificial goat whose blood, and the *nephesh* therein, reunites the separated human *nephesh* to the divine *nephesh*. In fact, Matthew 20:28 records Jesus' own statement that "the Son of Man came...to give his life a ransom for many." Jesus affirms that his atoning power is in his *life*, his *nephesh*. Through Jesus' *nephesh*, Jesus is able to enact the atonement that is intimately related to reconciliation among humans and between humans and God. This idea allows contemporary atonement theories to rid themselves of the notion of a violent, blood-thirsty God. The atonement need not, and *should* not, be built upon the idea that God must exact vengeance for the sins of humanity. Rather, in spite of the separation from God that humanity itself has caused, out of an immeasurable self-giving love, God provides God's self in the form of Jesus Christ to serve as the intermediary *nephesh* that can reunite and reconcile the separated human *nephesh* to the divine.

Melanie Bair is a Biblical Studies major at Messiah College.