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Journal of Translation
ISSN 1558-7282 (online)
https://siljot.org

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Journal of Translation 3 (1), 2007: 9–23.
https://doi.org/10.54395/JOT-894PF

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Translating the Levitical Sacrifices

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Abstract

In this article, I begin with section 1 by presenting the five main sacrifices found in the first seven chapters of Leviticus, including their relations to the requirement for Israel to be holy. In section 2, I describe the functions of the levitical sacrifices, and in section 3, I compare these with the functions of the multifarious sacrifices carried out by the Supyire people in southern Mali. After arguing the case for translating the functions rather than the forms of the levitical sacrifices (*contra* the majority of English translations), I present, in section 4, suggestions for Supyire renderings of the sacrifices based on their functions.

1. The levitical sacrifices in the context of the Pentateuch

Leviticus 1–7 comprises regulations for the people of Yahweh in their performance of five kinds of sacrifice. The importance of these regulations is shown by their detailed nature and their place at the start of the book.

Leviticus is intimately linked with Exodus, which describes how Yahweh, having chosen his people as a holy nation and delivered them from Egypt, sets out the covenant binding the two parties and then comes in cloud and fire to dwell among his people in the meeting tent (Exod. 40:34, 38). The link is indicated by the fact that Leviticus starts with a conjunction: "Then Yahweh called to Moses and spoke to him from the meeting tent, saying, Speak to the sons of Israel: When a man among you brings an offering to Yahweh from animals ..." (my own translation).

Setting the levitical sacrifices in their context helps to determine their purpose. Yahweh's desire is to have a dwelling among his people. However, there is an unresolved tension: the rebellion of man against the holy God. Moses cannot enter the meeting tent because it is filled with God's glory (Exod. 40:35). If even Yahweh's spokesman cannot enter, what hope is there for the future of God's relationship with his people? Nevertheless, Leviticus emphasizes, there is hope. Wenham (1979:18) asserts that the book's motto is: "You shall be holy for I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2). The tension is resolved as Yahweh provides a way for the people to be holy and to enjoy a relationship with him, and that way has at its heart the system of sacrifices.

The concepts of 'holy' and 'common' (or 'profane'), 'clean' and 'unclean', are integral to understanding Leviticus. Since God is holy, then anything associated with his service must also become holy, that is, consecrated to him. The location for the sacrifices, the meeting tent, its contents, the priesthood, and the sacrificial animals all must be holy. Generally, things that are common can be so consecrated, under the strict condition that they are clean. But at all costs what is unclean must not come in contact with what is holy.

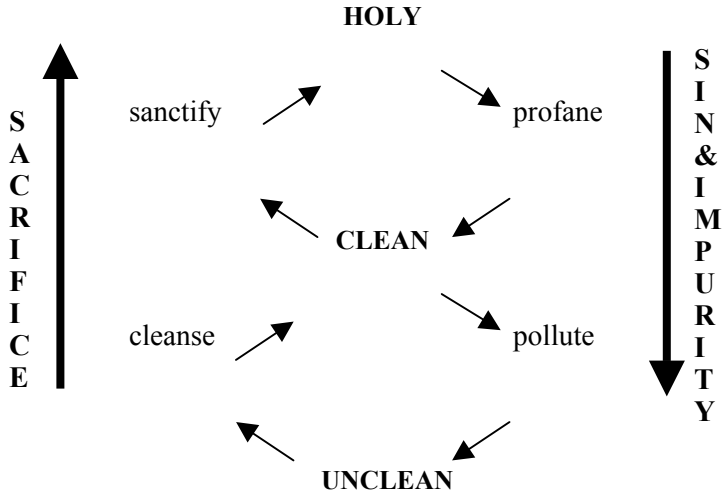
The high priest Aaron and his descendants were instructed, "You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the clean and the unclean" (Lev. 10:10). There is a double contrast: what is holy is opposed to what is common, and what is clean is opposed to what is unclean. Wenham's analysis (1979:19) of these contrasts can be summarized as follows:

[1] This article is a summary of his M.Phil. thesis, "Through the shedding of blood: A comparison of the Levitical and the Supyire concepts of sacrifice."

- Everything that is not holy is common.
- Common things divide into two groups, the clean and the unclean.
- Cleanness is an intermediate state between holiness and uncleanness.
- Cleanness is the usual intermediate state of most persons and things. (This implies that what is holy is set apart as somehow special.)
- Clean things become holy when they are sanctified, but unclean objects cannot be sanctified.
- Clean things can be made unclean by being polluted.
- Holy items may be profaned and become common. They may even be polluted and made unclean.
- The unclean and the holy are states that must never come into contact with each other. If an unclean person eats part of a sacrificial animal, which is holy food, he will be cut off from his people (Lev. 7:20–21).
- Most importantly, sin and impurity cause profanation and pollution, while the offering of sacrifices reverses the process and brings about cleansing and sanctification.

Figure 1 (adapted from Wenham 1979:19) sets out the relationships between the holy, the clean, and the unclean and gives a description of the relationships and how moving from one state to another is effected.

Figure 1. Dynamics of sacrifice, sin and infirmity in Leviticus



Eating unclean animals was forbidden (Lev. 11:2–8). Even touching the carcass of an unclean animal entailed temporary uncleanness (Lev. 11:24), which meant that the temporarily unclean person could not approach the tabernacle. In Leviticus a detailed division of animals into the clean and the unclean is provided. (And among the clean animals, only certain species were considered appropriate to be sacrificed.)

The social anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) seeks to relate the distinctions among animals to the laws on holiness found in Leviticus. She argues that holiness means separateness, wholeness, and perfection:

> Much of Leviticus is taken up with stating the physical perfection that is required of things presented in the temple [sic] and of persons approaching it. The animals offered in sacrifice must be without blemish, women must be purified after childbirth, and lepers should be separated and ritually cleansed before being allowed to approach it once they are cured.... In short, the idea of holiness was given an

> external, physical expression in the wholeness of the body seen as a perfect container (Douglas 1966: 51–52).

According to Douglas, the same idea of wholeness is carried over into the categorization of the animal world, which in Gen. 1:20–30 is divided into three categories: those that fly in the air, those that walk on the land, and those that swim in the sea. Wenham (1979:169) summarized her argument as follows:

> Each sphere has a particular mode of motion associated with it. Birds have two wings with which to fly and two feet for walking; fish have fins and scales with which to swim; land animals have hoofs to run with. The clean animals are those that conform to these standard pure types. Those creatures which in some way transgress the boundaries are unclean. Thus fish without fins and scales are unclean....

Douglas sees a parallel between holiness required in humans (conformity to moral and physical norms) and cleanness in animals (conformity to the norms of the animal group to which they belong). Further, the "threefold division of animals—unclean, clean and sacrificial—parallels the divisions of mankind, the unclean, i.e., those excluded from the camp of Israel, the clean, i.e., the majority of ordinary Israelites, and those who offer sacrifice, i.e., the priests" (Wenham 1979:170).

However, in reality this threefold division is rather more nuanced. There are different degrees or gradations of both holiness and impurity. Anything associated with disorder, such as skin diseases, mixed crops, and mixed teams of plough animals, is impure, but disorder is manifested supremely in death. Death is the greatest disorder, directly opposed to life and wholeness, and thus to holiness. Gradations may be tabulated as follows (based on Jenson 1992:37 and Wenham 1979:177):

Table 1. Gradations of holiness

LIFE & NORMALITY ⟶ Increasingly abnormal ⟶ DEATH & TOTAL DISORDER

	Very Holy	**Holy**	**Clean**	**Unclean**	**Very unclean**
Place	Holy of Holies	Holy Place	court	camp	outside camp
Time	Day of Atonement	festivals, Sabbath	common days		
Persons Admitted	high priest	priest without deformity	priests, Levites, and Israelites who are clean	those who are clean but have minor impurities	those with major impurities and the dead
Animals	blood of perfect sacrificial animal	perfect sacrificial animals	clean animals	unclean animals	carcasses
Ritual	sacrificial (not eaten)	sacrificial (priests eat)	sacrificial (non-priests may eat)	purification (one day)	purification (seven days)

While both impurity and sin are antithetical to holiness, and the disorder of impurity is symbolic of the disorder caused by sin, the relationship between impurity and sin is somewhat complex. Sin inevitably causes impurity and certain sins, especially in the sexual domain, are explicitly said to be defiling (e.g., in Lev. 18:6–25). On the other hand, not *all* ritual impurity is sin; for example, contact with a corpse, which is sometimes unavoidable. However, to *deliberately* defile oneself in contradiction to God's prohibitions is sin (see e.g., Lev. 21:1–4). So is failure to deal with ritual impurity in the prescribed way.

In section 2, I will explore how the sacrifices reverse the effects of sin and impurity, restore the holiness of the people and the tabernacle, and allow fellowship with the holy God.

2. The functions of the levitical sacrifices

2.1 The meaning of sacrificial blood

In each of the four animal sacrifices in Leviticus 1–7 the priest must apply the blood to the altar, but the only part of the Old Testament in which it is explicitly stated how sacrificial blood effects atonement is found in Yahweh's words in Lev. 17:10–11:

> Any Israelite or any alien living among them who eats blood—I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life (NIV).

The meaning of this text is debated. Some follow Vincent Taylor, who states, "The victim is slain in order that its life, in the form of blood, may be released; ... the bestowal of life is the fundamental idea in sacrificial worship" (cited by Morris 1983:54). Thus, the RSV translates the final phrase as "it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life."

Others, like Harrison, rather see blood as a symbol of life given up in death: "Shed blood constituted visible evidence that life had indeed been offered up in sacrifice" (1980:182). This is reflected in the NIV translation of Lev. 17:11: "it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life."

This second interpretation is cogently defended by Morris (1983:53–61) who sets out the following arguments in its favor:

- Out of 362 occurrences of 'blood' in the Old Testament, 203 denote violent death.
- Even in those passages that link blood and life, the meaning is life given up in death. One example is Gen. 9:5 in which Yahweh says, "For your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting.… From each man, too, I will surely demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man." This refers to murder.
- The Hebrew נפשׁ (*nephesh*), translated 'life' in Lev. 17:11, often has the meaning 'life given up in death'. A Hebrew might speak of 'lying in wait for the *nephesh*' or 'laying a snare for the *nephesh*' when murder is plotted (see, e.g., 1 Sam. 28:9 and Prov. 1:18).
- Sometimes atonement is linked with another part of the sacrificial process, such as the burning of fat, or possibly the sacrificial rite as a whole (Lev. 4:26, 31, 35; Exod. 29:31–33), rather than specifically to blood.

I conclude, with Morris, that plainly it is the death of the victim that is vital.

2.2 Varieties of sacrifice

It remains to explain why different sorts of sacrifice were necessary and what their various functions were. Table 2 outlines the content and disposition of each of the five sacrifices in Leviticus 1–7, along with their primary focus and purpose. (In section 2.3, I will explain my conclusions as to the purpose of each kind of sacrifice.) Note that the regulations are composed of two sets of overlapping instructions, one set focusing on the presentation of the offering by a member of the community (Lev. 1:2–6:7) and the other set on how the offering was then to be used, which largely involved the priests (Lev. 6:8–7:34).

Table 2. The five major sacrifices: their form and function

Name	Transliteration and traditional translation	Ref.1	Ref.2	Material Offered	Disposition	Focus of Ritual	Primary Purpose
עלה	*ʿōlāh* burnt offering	1	6:8–13	individual male animal (its value according to the means of the offerer)	all burned	burning of the whole animal	substitutionary atonement
מנחה	*minḥāh* grain offering	2	6:14–23	salted, unleavened grain or cakes	part burned, the rest assigned to priests	presentation of grain	tribute: thanksgiving and consecration to the covenant Lord
שלמים	*shᵉlāmîm* peace offering	3	7:11–21	animal from flock or herd (value depending on the means of the offerer)	fat burned, the rest eaten as a fellowship meal	distribution of flesh to various parties	enjoyment of fellowship between the people and Yahweh
חטאת	*ḥaṭṭāʾṯ* sin offering	4:1–5:13	6:24–30	bull (for priest or community) male goat (for community leader) female goat or lamb (for individual) doves or pigeon or grain (for a poor person)	fat burned, the rest eaten by priests	manipulation of the blood	purification of the sanctuary and the people
אשם	*ʾāshām* guilt offering	5:14–6:7	7:1–10	ram	fat burned, the rest eaten by priests	value of the sacrificial animal	reparation for the desecration of Yahweh's holy property or name

2.3 Purpose(s) of each sacrifice

2.3.1 Purpose of the עלה 'burnt offering'

Leviticus 1 gives us clues as to the purpose of the עלה 'burnt offering', also translated 'whole offering'.

Clue A: The worshiper is to "lay his hand on the head of the animal" (v. 4).

Clue B: It is accepted as a ransom for the worshiper (v. 4).

Clue C: It is "an aroma pleasing to Yahweh" (vv. 9, 13, 17).

I will look more closely at each clue in turn.

2.3.1.1 Clue A: Laying a hand on the animal's head

Several different theories have been advanced as to the significance of laying a hand on the head of the animal:

- *Symbolic transference of the offerer's sin to the animal.* Laying a hand on the animal's head transferred the sin to the animal "so that when it died it was taking the punishment due to the worshipper for his sins" (Morris 1983:47). Such a transfer did take place annually on the Day of Atonement when the high priest placed both of his hands on a goat and confessed the people's wickedness and rebellion of over it before driving it into the desert (Lev. 16:21–22). Some rebut this view, saying that in Leviticus 1 this is not the meaning because only one hand is laid on the animal (Sansom 1983:324); they further argue that the same action of laying on one hand takes place in the peace offering, which has "little concern with expiating sin" (Hartley 1992:20).
- *Identification of the soul of the offerer and that of the animal.* By laying a hand on the animal's head the offerer participated in the death of the animal that dies in place of him, a sinner. Milgrom (1991:151) dismisses this concept as magical and alien to biblical thought.
- *An act associated with the offerer's declaration of the purpose of the sacrifice.* Laying one's hand on the animal's head assured that sacrifices intended for specific rites would be used solely for that purpose (Milgrom 1991:151, citing R. Péter). However, if this was the significance, why was this action not required for all five sacrifices?
- *Identification of the offerer as the owner of the animal and beneficiary of the sacrifice.* According to Jewish tradition, it was important to personally bring one's own animal to sacrifice, rather than sending it with a servant. So one theory is that laying one's hand on the animal's head ensured that the sacrifice benefited the offerer, and not someone else.

Of the preceding options, the first one, the symbolic transfer of sin to the animal, is the most probable. It is supported by the following arguments:

- There is a great similarity between laying on one hand and laying on two hands as was done on the Day of Atonement, and the meaning of the latter is stated clearly in Lev. 16:21–22.
- The difference between the number of hands mentioned may reflect physical constraints: The offerer who was dragging an animal into the tabernacle may have had only one hand free to place on its head, whereas on the Day of Atonement, Aaron, who probably was assisted in handling the goat, may well have had both hands free. Alternatively, it is possible that two hands were required for the Day of Atonement sacrifice because of the importance of confessing over it "all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites" (Lev. 16:21). In any case, the essential nature of the symbolic act was the same, whether laying on one hand or two.
- The transfer of sin is a weighty matter and would appear to merit the place accorded to this action near the very beginning of the levitical regulations. This transfer is in accordance with a major theme in the Pentateuch: the need for Israel to deal with its sin to live in the presence of a

holy God. The identification of the offerer, in contrast, is not stressed anywhere else in the text of Leviticus or indeed of the Old Testament.

- As for the argument that the action is part of the peace offering, which is not expiatory, Wenham (1979:111) counters that "in some degree substitution seems to form part of the theology of all the sacrifices."

2.3.1.2 Clue B: It is a ransom

The word כפר (*kipper*) has one of two possible emphases depending on the context in which it is found. Here, in this context, it means 'to ransom', while in the context of the purification offering, it means 'to cleanse'. It is not unusual for a word to develop more than one meaning according to context. There is, in fact, a common denominator: in both contexts, כפר is overturning the negative consequences of sin.

In Lev 1:4, כפר means 'to pay a ransom and propitiate God's wrath against sin'. The payment of a ransom in the Old Testament allowed a guilty party to escape the death penalty. A husband was entitled to exact the death penalty against a faithless wife and her lover (Lev. 20:10), but he might choose to spare them on payment of a ransom (Prov. 6:35). The עלה 'burnt offering' functioned as a ransom when God told Job's friends to sacrifice a burnt offering so that they would not be dealt with according to their folly (Job 42:8). When King Ahaz neglected to present a burnt offering in the holy place to the God of Israel, it resulted in Yahweh's wrath coming upon Judah and Jerusalem (2 Chron. 29:7–8).

Levine (1989:115) elaborates on the idea of ransom as follows:

> Basic to the theory of sacrifice ... was the notion of substitution. The sacrifice substituted for an individual human life or the lives of the members of the community in situations where God could have exacted the life of the offender.... Indeed, all who stood in God's immediate presence risked becoming the object of divine wrath. But substitution could avert the danger.…

2.3.1.3 Clue C: Soothing aroma to Yahweh

The smell of the burning עלה soothes Yahweh and changes his attitude to man. A good example is found in the account of Noah. According to Gen. 6:5, Yahweh decided to destroy humankind when he saw that every imagination of man's heart was evil from his youth, but after the flood Noah made his burnt offering, and "when Yahweh smelled the soothing aroma, Yahweh thought: I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). Wenham (1979:56) comments, "Though man was unchanged in his sinfulness, God's attitude to man altered, thanks to the burnt offering."

2.3.1.4 Conclusion drawn from the clues

Having examined the different clues, I conclude that the purpose of the עלה 'burnt offering' is to pay a ransom and avert God's wrath against the sinner. The death of the animal is substituted for the death of the sinner. This transfer of sin is symbolized by his placing his hands on the animal. The agreeable smell of the burning animal rising to heaven symbolizes God's acceptance of the substitute.

It is true that the burnt offering was versatile and could be used for other purposes. For example, in the case of Abraham it was used as a test of his obedience (Gen. 22:1–2). It could be presented as a freewill offering, a spontaneous act in response to God's goodness. Again, as a votive offering, vowed in advance, it was given in thankfulness for an answered prayer (Lev. 22:18–21). But the purpose which came to predominate was that of substitutionary atonement. The burnt offering was an essential part of the regular pattern of cultic worship prescribed in Numbers 28–29. Daily, weekly, monthly, and feast-day acts of worship existed, each of which required a specific burnt offering. "The frequent presentation of whole offerings enabled the covenant community, despite the human proneness to sin, to maintain fellowship with the holy God" (Hartley 1992:18).

2.3.2 Purpose of the מנחה 'grain offering'

The מנחה 'grain offering' is unique among the five main types of levitical sacrifices in that it does not involve animals. It is traditionally translated as 'grain offering' or 'cereal offering'. Apart from the prescribed sacrifices presented regularly at the tabernacle, מנחה is also used in a more general way for a gift, tribute, or any kind of offering to God, whether grain or animals. It is a "present made to secure or retain good will" (Milgrom 1991:196, citing Driver). It was often designated as a gift to someone in a superior position to the giver. Gideon, for example, gave a מנחה out of reverence to the angel of the Lord who appeared to him (Judg. 6:19). Hartley (1992:29) says that "a grain offering is a gift for Yahweh in recognition of his lordship and his total claim on the presenter's life." The word 'tribute' probably better captures the idea than 'gift' in the context of the levitical offering, as Yahweh is already the owner of everything, and no one can add to his possessions through any gift.

God granted forgiveness of sins through the burnt offering, and the worshiper responded by giving back to God some of the produce of his land. The combination of burnt offering and grain offering was repeated many times in a lifetime. "Man's sinful nature requires that he repeatedly seek divine forgiveness and he renew his dedication to God and his covenant vows" (Wenham 1979:72).

2.3.3 Purpose of the שלמים 'peace/fellowship offering'

The word שלמים 'peace offering' refers to what is essentially a fellowship meal. The burning of the fat and entrails is described as a "gift of food" for Yahweh (Lev. 3:11, 16). Although the idea of giving food to Yahweh is at first sight startling, Levine argues that while it preserves "the idiom common to ancient religions, it understands the process somewhat differently. God desires the sacrifices of His worshippers not because He requires sustenance but because He desires their devotion and their fellowship" (Levine 1989:17). This fits well with the description in Deut. 12:6–7 of a joyful feast in which the presence of Yahweh was especially near:

> Bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.

The fellowship offering was usually an occasion for joy and fellowship involving the offerer, his family, the priest, and Yahweh. This offering could be offered at any time and was especially appropriate at the high points of the nation's life: sealing the covenant at Sinai, the installation of King Saul, David's bringing of the ark to Jerusalem, and the dedication of Solomon's temple. As Averbeck (1997:1001) puts it, "The point of eating was to enact the bond of relationship that had been established between God and his people. Whenever such an offering was presented, it re-enacted the same bond and could have the effect of calling the people to renewed covenant loyalty to Yahweh and one another."

As a voluntary offering, the requirements were somewhat relaxed. For example, normally the sacrificial beast had to be without defect (Lev. 3:1), but this was not so for the fellowship offering (Lev. 22:23). On the other hand, the priest is still required to dash the blood against all sides of the altar. Thus "even this essentially joyful sacrifice includes a blood rite, a reminder that sinful man is always in need of the forgiveness of his sin" (Wenham 1979:80).

2.3.4 Purpose of the חטאת 'sin/purification offering'

Since חטאת most commonly means 'to sin', the traditional translation for this sacrifice has been 'sin offering' (or its equivalent), dating back to the Septuagint (LXX). Most commentators have seen it as the principal expiatory offering. Its purpose is stated by Keil as "putting an end to the separation between man and God that had been created by sin" (cited in Wenham 1979:93). However, more recent commentators, such as Milgrom, Wenham, and Hartley, agree that this is inadequate and all prefer the rendering 'purification offering'. Their reasons can be summarized as follows:

- The other blood offerings in their different ways atoned for sin, and so simply to translate חטאת as 'sin offering' obscures the precise function of the sacrifice.

- Morphologically, it corresponds not to the Hebrew 'qal' form of the verb חטאת 'to sin', but to its Hebrew 'piel' form, which means 'to cleanse, decontaminate' (Milgrom 1991:253).
- In various places where the offering is connected with purification (e.g., Lev. 12:8; 14:19), the rites are said to cleanse people from bodily pollutions.
- Lev. 15:31 states the purpose of this offering: "You must separate the children of Israel from their uncleanness so that they do not die in their uncleanness by polluting my tabernacle which is among them" (as translated by Wenham 1979). This, coinciding with the application of the blood to various parts of the tabernacle, demonstrates that the particular emphasis of this offering is not so much the reconciliation of human beings with God as the purifying of Yahweh's sanctuary from uncleanness.

On the need for the annual חטאת 'purification offering' on the Day of Atonement, in addition to the ongoing sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus 4, Hartley (1992:244) comments as follows:

> Given the reality that humans by nature sin continually, pollution of the sanctuary was unavoidable. Therefore it had to be cleansed yearly by these blood rites on these key sacred objects in order that it might continue to function efficaciously as the place for the worship of Yahweh.

Certain sins would not be covered by the more regular purification offering: unwitting breach of uncleanness rules, sins never coming to consciousness, and sins committed defiantly for which the offender himself could not bring an offering. However, one should not imagine that anyone was keeping a tally or making a strict division as to what was being covered on the Day of Atonement, for the language of Lev. 16:30 is very inclusive: "Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites."

The חטאת, then, is clearly purificatory in nature. It helps deal with the polluting effects of sin and of physical impurities that affect Yahweh's people and dwelling place. The purification ensures that when the people come into the presence of their God, the holy and the unclean do not come in contact, which would result in death (Lev. 16:2). However, the חטאת in and of itself does not automatically convey purification, at least in the case of sin, for it follows confession of sin and penitence (e.g., in Lev. 5:5 and 16:29) on the part of the offenders and depends ultimately on the will of Yahweh, who prescribed it.

2.3.5 Purpose of the אשם 'guilt/reparation offering'

The RSV, NEB, NIV, and NLT all translate אשם as 'guilt offering', whereas recent commentators unanimously see this as unhelpful and prefer 'reparation offering'. Jenson (1992:160, fn. 2) points out that a great deal of confusion arises because of three different meanings of אשם. According to context, it can mean

a. sacrifice of reparation,
b. the penalty for guilt, or
c. the state of guilt.

The confusion is compounded by the common mistranslation of Lev. 5:7, where the purification offering is described as אשם. In that context אשם should be translated 'penalty for his sin' (as in the NIV) or 'reparation for his sin' (as in the REB). However, many versions have followed the RSV, which translates it as 'guilt offering', with the result that many commentators in the past took the אשם as a kind of חטאת or vice versa. In fact, says Wenham (1979:105), "the two sacrifices were quite different. The ritual was different. The sacrificial animals were different. The circumstances in which they were offered differed.... In short, different names denote different sacrifices."

In Leviticus 5–6, three different occasions for a reparation offering are set out:

(1) when a person unintentionally commits a violation in regard to any of Yahweh's holy things;
(2) when a person does what is forbidden by any of Yahweh's commands, even though he does not know it; and
(3) when a person deceives his neighbor about something left in his care or cheats him or swears falsely about it.

(1) An example of the first of these is found in Lev. 22:14: "If anyone eats a sacred offering by mistake, he must make restitution to the priest." On discovering his fault, he was to return the property or its value plus twenty percent of the value plus a ram as a reparation offering (Lev. 5:15–16).

(2) Lev. 5:17 declares that the person transgressing a command is guilty (אשם) and will be held responsible even though he does not know it. The syntax of the Hebrew makes it difficult to interpret what it is "he does not know." This has provoked various interpretations. In Levine's commentary (1989), the verse is translated to suggest that the offender did not know that his action was forbidden. Levine (1989:32) points out, though, that this would mean that there is no distinction between the occasion for the reparation offering and the occasion for the purification offering (Lev. 4:27–35)—both would be dealing with inadvertent offenses. Levine follows the rabbinical interpretation that the offender suspected he may have committed an offense but did not know for certain, as was true of Job, who used to make a "contingent sacrifice" just in case his sons had sinned (Job 1:5). Since the exact offense is unknown, there can be no return of the property; simply a ram is offered in sacrifice. Milgrom postulates that the offerer has been suffering psychologically or physically and, unaware of the cause of his feelings of guilt, has been imagining the worst-case scenario: that he has committed some sacrilege, though in fact it may have been something else (Milgrom 1991:332–333).

(3) An example of the third occasion is in Lev. 6:2–3. "If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the Lord by deceiving his neighbor about something entrusted to him or left in his care or stolen, or if he cheats him, or if he finds lost property and lies about it, *and* [*contra* NIV] if he swears falsely, or if he commits any such sin...." Someone who thus "swears falsely" has not only defrauded his neighbor, but has compounded the sin by denying it under oath, using the name of Yahweh (Milgrom 1991:336f.). By such swearing, "the Lord has been made an accomplice to the defrauding of man" (Milgrom 1991:365).

The common thread in these three cases is desecration of something holy: holy property or offerings, or the holy people of Israel, or the holy name of Yahweh.

When an offender feels guilt concerning some desecration and if the offense is known, he is to make full compensation or reparation to all offended parties, putting them back in the same position as before plus a twenty percent additional penalty. Besides this compensation, he is to present a reparation offering to Yahweh, the purpose of which is that the priest will make atonement for him and he will be forgiven (Lev. 5:16, 18; 6:7).

2.4 Summary of the purposes of the levitical sacrifices

Although the levitical sacrificial system, with its various forms of sacrifice, is very complex, Wenham sees substitutionary atonement as a part of the function of all of the blood sacrifices and he views the different sacrifices as dealing with different effects of sin:

> The burnt offering uses a personal picture: of man the guilty sinner who deserves to die for his sin and of the animal dying in his place. God accepts the animal as a ransom for man. The sin offering uses a medical model: sin makes the world so dirty that God can no longer dwell there. The blood of the animal disinfects the sanctuary in order that God may continue to be present with his people. The reparation offering presents a commercial picture of sin. Sin is a debt which man incurs against God. The debt is paid through the offered animal. (Wenham 1979:111)

Sacrifice indeed deals with the effects of sin, but Yahweh, who in the cloud and fire was physically and visibly present in the tabernacle, was also concerned about the visible, physical holiness and purity of his residence and of the people who approached him there (Averbeck 1997:1008). Sacrifice, especially the purification offering, addressed this too, at least in part.

On the one hand, substitutionary atonement, purification, and the restoration of broken fellowship are central to עלה 'burnt offering', חטאת 'sin/purification offering', and אשם 'guilt/reparation offering'. On the other hand, the focal purpose of the מנחה 'grain offering' and שלמים 'peace/fellowship offering' is the enjoyment of that fellowship once restored. To put it another way, the first group of sacrifices is concerned primarily to restore the holiness of Israel after it has been compromised and the second group to maintain that holiness through consecration and fellowship.

3. Levitical and Supyire sacrifices compared

Consider now the Supyire people who live in the savannah region of Mali. To the south of them in West Africa, Christianity is the main religion, while to the north Islam predominates. The Supyire have not been quick to adopt either of these major religions, but rather have held to their traditional practices of sacrifice to their ancestors, bush spirits, water spirits and fetishes. Certain functions of sacrifice in Leviticus display similarities to the functions of Supyire sacrifice: homage, reconciliation, consecration, reparation, and fulfillment of a vow. However, the Supyire do not perform sacrifices to purify themselves or their property from the effects of sin, as they do not share the levitical concept of sin in terms of its having a polluting effect. Also certain functions of sacrifice in Supyire society are forbidden in the Old Testament: divination (Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:10), consulting the spirits of the dead (Deut. 18:11), and magic or sorcery in which the magician seeks to compel a divinity or occult forces to work for him (Lev. 19:26).

Thus, despite the similarities, profound differences exist between the levitical and Supyire concepts of sacrifice. These differences can be brought out by answering the following questions:

Who demands the sacrifice? The Supyire sacrifice to a plurality of beings; the Israelites to one alone.

Who benefits from the sacrifice? In Supyire thought, sacrifice is founded on the principle of *do ut des,* "I give in order that you give." In other words, it is a transaction of mutual benefit. The power of the worshiped increases and, in return, he will execute the prayer of the worshiper. In the Pentateuch, Yahweh and Israel are in a covenant relationship in which Israel receives promised blessings in return for fulfiling its obligations, including sacrifice. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference. Unlike the Supyire deities, Yahweh is already omnipotent and stands in no need of any sacrifice to increase his power. Indeed, it is he who ultimately provides the means of sacrifice to his people so that they can sacrifice to him for their benefit.

Why is sacrifice necessary? In the Pentateuch, sacrifice is necessary because of sin and rebellion against a holy God. Due to his holy character, he is implacably opposed to sin. For the Supyire, the relationship between humans and the supernatural is strained but the ethical dimension is not to the fore. The strain may come as much from one side as from the other, due to the humanlike, unpredictable moods of the ancestors and spirits.

How is sacrifice effective? The shedding of blood is a powerful symbol in both cultures, but at root the symbolism is very different. For Israel, the shedding of blood is a symbol of death exacted by God in just punishment for sin. For the Supyire, it is a symbol of a force bestowing life, which is transferred from the slaughtered animal to the beneficiary of the sacrifice. Just as a Supyire fetish increases in size as more and more blood congeals on it over the years, so too does its power. Its increasing power comes from the life-giving force of many animals. For the Israelite, the shed blood is efficacious because the living God has so prescribed it; but for the Supyire, blood's efficacy is founded on an animistic view of the universe in which each object has its own life force that can be transferred to another through sacrifice.

4. Translating the Hebrew terms for the levitical sacrifices

4.1 Supyire terms for 'sacrifice'

The Supyire have two main words for 'sacrifice'. One is *sun,* which is typically pouring out water, millet, or blood on a sacred spot or on a fetish. One cannot *sun* God—the two words do not collocate. The other term is *sáraga,* a term borrowed from Bambara, the trade language. The latter has a much wider range of meaning. It includes *sun* but refers to any type of sacrifice, even almsgiving. Through contact with Islam, the Supyire are aware of sacrifices to God, and for this they use the word *sáraga.* Therefore, to translate the words that refer to the five levitical sacrifices, it has been suggested that the general word *sáraga* be used along with a suitable additional component in each case. Since Supyire vocabulary has multiple compound nouns, this works well.

4.2 Shall we translate the form or function of the sacrifices?

The question of most significance for Supyire translators is whether the compounds should reflect the form or the function of the different sacrifices. It is instructive here to look at how translators into English have treated the five sacrifices. Table 3 sets out how ten English language versions have handled them:

Table 3. English translations of the five major sacrifices

	עלה *ʿōlāš*	מנחה *minḥāh*	שלמים *sh^{e}lāmîm*	חטאת *ḥaṭṭāʾṯ*	אשם *ʾāshām*
KJV	burnt sacrifice	meat offering (*meat* is an archaic word for *food*)	peace offering	Sin offering	trespass offering
NASB	burnt offering	grain offering	peace offering	Sin offering	guilt offering
RSV	burnt offering	cereal offering	peace offering	Sin offering	guilt offering
NRSV	burnt offering	grain offering	sacrifice of well-being	sin offering	guilt offering
NIV	burnt offering	grain offering	fellowship offering	sin offering	guilt offering
TEV	burnt offering	offering of grain	fellowship offering	sin offering	repayment offering
GWN	burnt offering	grain offering	fellowship offering	offering for sin	guilt offering
NCV	whole burnt offering	grain offering	fellowship offering	sin offering	penalty offering
NLT	whole burnt offering	grain offering	peace offering	sin offering	guilt offering
REB	whole offering	grain offering	shared offering	purification offering	reparation offering

All of these English renderings of the first two sacrifices focus on an aspect of the form of the offering. For עלה it is the means of disposition that is in focus: the animal is burnt, or the whole animal is offered to God, or both. For מנחה, the material offered, the grain, is the focus. While such renderings give the reader some idea of what happened, they give little or no hint of the reason for the sacrifice.

The English terms the translators chose for the other three kinds of sacrifice do not focus on the form, but most do not accurately reflect the function, either. The translators may have rather fallen victim to what Carson (1996:28) calls the root fallacy: "One of the most enduring of errors, the root fallacy presupposes that every word actually *has* a meaning bound up with its shape or its components. In this view, meaning is determined by etymology; that is, by the root or roots of a word."

The root of שלמים is שלם 'be complete', which has a cognate noun שלמ 'peace'; the word חטאת in many contexts means 'sin', and אשם often means 'guilt'. The common renderings 'peace offering', 'sin offering' and 'guilt offering' are based on word associations. The best that can be said for them is that they are connected in some general way to the functions of Israelite sacrifice, which *is* concerned with dealing with the effects of sin and guilt and bring peace with God, but they are much too general and do not relate to the distinctive functions of the respective sacrifices. It would be interesting to know what weight the tradition of a particular rendering over years and centuries in English has on the minds of contemporary translators.

The REB is the one version that seeks to reflect the functions of the sacrifices with renderings such as 'shared-offering', 'purification-offering', and 'reparation-offering'.

There are good reasons to attempt to reflect the functions of the sacrifices in our renderings of these terms. Concentrating on the form can either leave the audience totally in the dark concerning the function or, worse, give them the wrong idea about the function. For example, DeGraaf in his 1999 article on translating 'sacrifice' into Nyarafolo, a language closely related to Supyire, describes the dilemma he came

up against: on the one hand, *sun* 'to sacrifice' in Nyarafolo does not collocate with God; on the other hand, the form of the levitical sacrifice (slitting the animal's throat, letting the blood pour out, and occasionally burning up the entire thing) is very similar to that of *sun* in Nyarafolo culture. If the Nyarafolo translators choose to highlight the form by using *sun* for sacrifices in Leviticus, they will give very wrong signals concerning the function.

According to Wendland, if one has to choose between function and form, "the priority generally lies with the function, since that is normally more crucial to the understanding of the passage" (1987:61). He makes four exceptions to his general rule of preferring function:

> 1) where the form of itself is clear or familiar enough to convey the intended function as well …
> 2) where specific reference to a historical event is involved …
> 3) where there is a particular emphasis upon the formal features of an object or event in the context …
> 4) in the case of a term with special symbolic significance in the Scriptures, e.g., the ritual of circumcision (Gen. 17:11) or the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29) (Wendland 1987:61).

I will take each of these four exceptions in turn and discuss their application to the translation of the levitical sacrifices.

(1) *Where the form of itself is clear or familiar enough to convey the intended function as well.* The forms of sacrifices translated in English as "burnt" or "cereal" do not reveal much to the average reader. It is unlikely they would be any clearer for the Supyire reader. The Supyire do offer grain, but they do not burn their sacrifices.

(2) *Where specific reference to a historical event is involved.* Leviticus 1–7 is a procedural description of how sacrifices are to be carried out—no particular historical events are in view.

(3) *Where there is a particular emphasis upon the formal features of an object.* It is true that the forms the sacrifices take are important, for they are spelt out at length. However they are not reflected or emphasized in the Hebrew words themselves. The concepts "burnt" and "cereal" are not components of the Hebrew words עלה *ʿōlāh* and מנחה *minḥāh*.

(4) *A term with special symbolic significance in the Scriptures.* The term 'sacrifice' certainly is a key term with theological significance throughout the Old and New Testaments. However, the particular sacrifices of Leviticus 1–7 are mentioned only rarely in the New Testament; more commonly the generic terms 'sacrifice' and 'offering' are used or else the whole range of sacrifices is referred to in a set phrase such as 'burnt offerings and sacrifices' as in Mark 12:33.

Clearly, then, in choosing a rendering of the names of the Leviticus 1–7 sacrifices, there is no strong reason to go against the general rule of focusing on the function, rather than the form.

4.3 Suggestions for translating the names of the levitical sacrifices

The following are my tentative suggestions for translating the names of the levitical sacrifices in Supyire.

To translate עלה *ʿōlāh,* one possibility is 'atonement' or 'reconciliation' +*sáraga.* This expresses the main function of עלה and would be understood by the Supyire. However, it is probably too broad, because different aspects of atonement come into play in several of the levitical sacrifices. A better option is 'substitute' + *sáraga*, which would have the advantage of being more specific than 'atonement' + *sáraga*. The concept of a substitute being sacrificed is familiar to the Supyire.

To translate מנחה *minḥāh,* I suggest 'giving oneself' + *sáraga. '*Giving oneself' is the Supyire way of expressing dedication of oneself to someone more powerful, which is also the reason for giving a gift in tribute. The concept of giving oneself to a spiritual being is familiar to the Supyire. A person may be owned by a spirit and, as a result, be committed to make regular sacrifices to it.

To translate שלמים *sh^{e}lāmîm* I suggest 'fellowship' or 'communion' or 'shared' + *sáraga*, although it may prove difficult to find a Supyire word that would include the idea of fellowship with God. God is viewed as distant and remote and the Supyire do not make sacrifices to him. It may therefore be necessary to consider a phrase such as 'God and people together offering', in which the idea of sharing is made

explicit, even though this could prove unwieldy. In favor of the shorter expression, it could be argued that once the Supyire understand the idea that the Israelites sacrificed to God, they would automatically assume that he would be present at the sacrificial meal. They already use the expression 'May God add to it' in their prayers with most sacrifices.

To translate חטאת *ḥaṭṭā't,* I suggest 'cleansing' + *sáraga.* The concept of purification from the pollution caused by sin is unknown to the Supyire. As another option it may be possible to render חטאת as 'cleansing-before-God-sacrifice' or 'cleanse-from-defilement-sacrifice', but these might prove unwieldy and may not be necessary. In the context of Leviticus, all the sacrifices are made to God, and readers may be able to fit this sacrifice into the pattern, especially if the background information is supplied in another fashion, such as in a heading or footnote.

To translate אשם *'āshām,* I suggest 'reparation' + *sáraga.* The Supyire do make sacrifices to repair the land when it is spoilt by, for instance, human blood being spilt on it. This may open the way for an understanding of אשם as repairing the sanctity of God's property or name, but the term would have to be checked to ensure that the idea of repairing the land is not inferred. If that proved to be the case, then a term like 'reparation of God's property' + *sáraga* might have to be considered.

My submission, then, is that such translations which reflect the function, rather than the form, of the levitical sacrifices would help open the door for the Supyire to a Scriptural understanding of why God ordained that he should receive sacrifice, and that this approach is worthy of serious consideration in any translation project.

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Appendix

GWN God's Word to the Nations

KJV King James Version

NASB New American Standard Bible

NCV New Century Version

NEB New English Bible

NIV New International Version

NLT New Living Translation

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

REB Revised English Bible

RSV Revised Standard Version

TEV Today's English Version