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Sklar, Jay

Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions

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Reinhard Achenbach
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität
Munich, Germany

The author, Jay Sklar, has delivered a brilliant Ph.D. dissertation under the guidance of Gordon Wenham at the University of Gloucestershire (Cheltenham) that treats the important problem of the semantic meaning of the verb *kpr* (*pi'el*) in a concise and well-arranged lexicographical study. The questions are clearly put: “Why does the verb *kippaer* appear in contexts of both inadvertent sin and major impurity in the priestly literature?” and “Why is sacrifice able to fulfil the dual function of *kôphaer* and purgation?” The result is convincing: *kippaer* is rendered with “to effect *kôphaer*-purgation” because

the results of major impurities and inadvertent sins are the same, namely, that each requires both *ransom* (*kôphaer*) and *cleansing* (purgation). Stated differently, impurity not only *pollutes*, it also *endangers*, while sin not only *endangers*, it also *pollutes*. In either case, therefore, the person presenting the sacrifice needs to effect both *kôphaer* and purgation. The verb used to describe this dual event is *kippaer*. (187)

The answer to the second question is found in the fact that according to Lev 17:11 and Lev 8:15; 16; 19 the blood of the sacrifice is considered to have purifying power and, as the blood of atoning sacrifices, ransoms the life of the sinner (cf. Num 35:30–34). Sklar

writes that “inadvertent sin and major impurity both require sacrifice for atonement” (187); that is, since they both endanger (requiring ransom) and pollute (requiring purgation), the atonement sacrifice must effect both.

After a general introduction in which the author presents existing definitions of the term, he analyzes the Old Testament texts where *kippaer* appears in the contexts of sin (part 1 [11–101]) and in contexts of impurity (part 2 [105–36]). He then defines the relationship between sin and impurity and the function of *kippaer* (part 3 [139–59]) and describes the decisive role of blood for the priestly definition of sacrificial atonement according to the Holiness Code and other priestly texts. Because the range of texts giving support to a profound lexicographic description of the root and the term *kpr* is rather small, the Sklar is forced to refer to different layers of the priestly tradition. He is in close discussion with different positions in the field of scholarly research, and his way of preparing his arguments is thoughtful and very often convincing, going beyond the existing important studies from scholars such as Brichto, Janowski, Milgrom, Levine, Schenker, and D. P. Wright, among others. Step by step he gives a linguistically well-reflected description of the priestly terms and word fields concerning penalties for sin (death-, *kareth*-, *nasa’awôn*, and *’asham*) and impurity (*thr*, *ht’*, *qdsh*) as well as a complete analysis of all the places where the root *kpr* appears and of its relation to both fields. As often observed in Biblical Hebrew, the terms cover an exterior and an interior aspect, and, from the view of the mode of action, they have very often in the *pi’el* stem an accessive function with an estimative, declarative aspect (e.g., the verb *tm’* in the *pi’el* means “pronounce X impure”) and a factitive, resultative aspect (“to purify”). The analysis of *kippaer* clearly shows how under the priestly responsibility the effect of ransom and purgation was achieved by the sacrificial rites, because the blood was considered to accomplish the purgation, as it is considered a gift of life. The possibility of accomplishing atonement was offered by God himself (Lev 17:11). This connection makes the use of the Old Testament term *kippaer* in its dual function to be unique and outstanding. Sklar’s book is an benchmark study full of detailed exegetical observances, and it will be important for all exegetical studies that want to shed light on the concepts of ancient Israelite priestly theology.