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PERSPECTIVES ON PURITY AND PURIFICATION
IN THE BIBLE

edited by

Baruch J. Schwartz, David P. Wright,
Jeffrey Stackert, and Naphtali S. Meshel



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SIN AND IMPURITY: ATONED OR PURIFIED? YES!*

Jay Sklar

The goal of this essay is to answer one basic question: Why does the verb כָּפַר—traditionally translated in English with “to atone/make atonement”—occur in contexts of inadvertent sin *and* major impurity? To state this differently: it is not surprising that the verb for atonement occurs in contexts of sin, where the law of the LORD has been breached and the sinner is very much in need of atonement. But why does it also occur in contexts of impurity, where the law of the LORD has not necessarily been breached at all? Indeed, impurity can result from processes that are completely in keeping with the law of the LORD, such as giving birth (Lev 12; cf. Gen 1:28). Why, then, the need for atonement?

In order to answer this question, this essay begins with a consideration of how the term כָּפַר should be translated. It is argued that the two translations that do most justice to the verb כָּפַר are “to atone” (understood in the sense of “to ransom”) and “to purify.” It is then suggested that it is not always necessary to choose between these two translations, and that in point of fact the verb כָּפַר includes elements of both. In short, it seems that כָּפַר refers to כָּפַר-purgation, that is, the effecting of a כָּפַר-arrangement that has purgative results. The rest of the essay seeks to establish this by demonstrating on the one hand that sin not only endangers, it also pollutes; the כָּפַר-rite must therefore accomplish not only “ransom” but also “purification.” It demonstrates on the other hand that impurity not only pollutes, it also endangers; the כָּפַר-rite must therefore accomplish not only “purification” but also “ransom.” Consequently, it is very plausible that כָּפַר refers to elements of both ransom and purification in these contexts. This possibility is further supported with reference to the role of blood (which both *ransoms* and *purifies*) and to the use of כָּפַר in Num 35 (which calls for a *ransom* of blood in order to address the *pollution* of the land).

Various Approaches to the Translation of the Verb כָּפַר

The literature on כָּפַר is vast, and a full survey is beyond the range of the present study.¹ Nonetheless, the various approaches to כָּפַר in the priestly literature may

* This essay draws heavily from my dissertation, now published as *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005). I am thankful to Sheffield Phoenix Press for granting me permission to draw from this book in the following pages.

1. A more thorough review of the literature can be found in Bernd Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen. Studien zur Sühnetheologie der Priesterschrift und zur Wurzel KPR im Alten Orient und*

be conveniently grouped into two main camps. The first camp translates כִּפֶּר with “to atone/expiate” or “to make atonement/expiation” in all priestly occurrences. The second camp sometimes translates כִּפֶּר in this manner, but also translates it with renderings such as “to purify/effect purgation.” Each of these two main camps will be considered in turn.

“*To Atone*”

Traditionally, כִּפֶּר has been translated in the priestly literature with renderings such as “to atone/make atonement” or “to expiate/make expiation.”² While these renderings have generally been agreed upon, there has been a diversity of opinion as to the exact nature of this atonement. At least two main approaches may be identified.³

“*To cover.*” Many scholars, especially in the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth, argued that כִּפֶּר is related to Arabic *kafara*, “to cover,” and that atonement thus refers to a covering over of sin or the sinner.⁴ This approach has been critiqued on both linguistic and exegetical grounds, however, and has largely fallen out of favor.⁵

“*To ransom.*” A second approach understands atonement in terms of כִּפֶּר, that is, “ransom.” It is helpful in this regard to begin by defining the term כִּפֶּר. A survey of the various texts making use of this term leads to the following definition: “A כִּפֶּר is a legally or ethically legitimate payment that delivers a guilty party from a just punishment that is the right of the offended party to execute or to have executed. The acceptance of this payment is entirely dependent upon the choice of the offended party, it is a lesser punishment than was

im Alten Testament (Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1982), 1–26 (15–25). See also references in N. Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature: Its Meaning and Function* (JSOTSup 56; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 94 and notes; Baruch J. Schwartz, “The Prohibitions Concerning the ‘Eating’ of Blood in Leviticus 17,” in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* (ed. Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan; JSOTSup 125; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 34–66 (51 n. 3); and, for important earlier works, Johannes Herrmann, *Die Idee der Sühne im Alten Testament. Eine Untersuchung über Gebrauch und Bedeutung des Wortes kipper* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1905), 7–31.

2. AV; RSV; NASB; NIV; NEB; JB.

3. A third approach is that of Janowski (*Sühne*), who emphasizes the positive aspects of atonement and describes it as a process by which the worshipper symbolically dedicates his or her life to the holy. His view does not appear to have had a major impact, however, and will not be considered here. For interaction with and critique of this view, see Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 70–71 nn. 71–72, 113 n. 23.

4. See the references in Janowski, *Sühne*, 20–22; Schwartz, “Prohibitions,” 54 n. 2. For a full defense of this view, see Johann Jakob Stamm, *Erlösen und Vergeben im alten Testament. Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Bern: A. Francke, 1940), 61–66 and references cited there. See also Johann Heinrich Kurtz, *Sacrificial Worship of the Old Testament* (trans. James Martin; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1863), 67–71; Karl Elliger, *Leviticus* (HAT 4; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr: 1966), 71.

5. For interaction with and critique of this view, see Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 44 n. 2.

originally expected, and its acceptance serves both to rescue the life of the guilty and to appease the offended party, thus restoring peace to the relationship.”⁶

The fact that כִּפָּר is used to refer to “ransom” in at least some instances enjoys a broad consensus among biblical scholars. Thus Johannes Herrmann,⁷ Herbert Brichto,⁸ Baruch Levine,⁹ Adrian Schenker,¹⁰ Bernd Janowski,¹¹ and Jacob Milgrom¹² all agree that כִּפָּר does occur with a meaning denominative of כִּפָּר in at least some passages. Support for this is found in two avenues.

First, and most significantly, the verb כִּפָּר and the noun כִּפָּר at times occur together in the same pericope and are clearly related in meaning. Milgrom’s comments in this regard are helpful:

There are...cases in which the ransom [i.e. כִּפָּר] principle is clearly operative. (1) The function of the census money (Exod 30:12–16) is *lēkappēr* ‘*al-napšōtēkem* “to ransom your lives” (Exod 30:16; cf. Num 31:50): here the verb *kippēr* must be related to the expression found in the same pericope *kōper napšō* “a ransom for his life” (Exod 30:12). (2) The same combination of the idiom *kōper nepeš* and the verb *kippēr* is found in the law of homicide (Num 35:31–33). Thus in these two cases, *kippēr* is a denominative from *kōper*, whose meaning is undisputed: “ransom” (cf. Exod 21:30). Therefore, there exists a strong possibility that all texts that assign to *kippēr* the function of averting God’s wrath have *kōper* in mind: guilty life spared by substituting for it the innocent parties or their ransom.¹³

6. For fuller discussion, including the exegesis of the relevant texts (Exod 21:28–32; 30:11–16; Num 35:30–34; Ps 49:8–9 [ET 7–8]; Prov 6:20–35; 1 Sam 12:1–5; Amos 5:12; Isa 43:3–4; Job 33:24), see Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 48–67. It is also noted there that the term כִּפָּר can be used in a negative way, that is, as referring to a “bribe.” This sense of the term, however, is unrelated to the sacrificial contexts of the priestly texts.

7. “Many students rightly assume that there is a close connection between כִּפָּר and כִּפָּר” (Johannes Herrmann, “ἰλάσκομαι, ἰλασμός,” *TDNT* 3:301–10 [303]); “At Is. 47:11 כִּפָּר means ‘to pay כִּפָּר,’ ‘to raise a כִּפָּר,’ ‘to avert by כִּפָּר’” (Herrmann, *TDNT* 3:303).

8. Brichto’s general conclusion on the meaning of the verb is as follows: “To offer/make composition [i.e. a כִּפָּר], to accept composition—is the basic force of *kipper*” (Herbert Chanan Brichto, “On Slaughter and Sacrifice, Blood and Atonement,” *HUCA* 47 [1976]: 19–55 [35]; see also 26–27, 34, and discussion in Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 76–77).

9. Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* [SJLA 5; Leiden: Brill, 1974], 67: “*Kippēr* in biblical cultic texts reflects two distinct verbal forms: (1) *kippēr* I, the primary *Pi^{ce}l*, and (2) *kippēr* II, a secondary denominative, from the noun *kōper* ‘ransom, expiation gift.’” (Note: *kippēr* in Levine’s original is likely an error, the correct form being *kipper*.)

10. See Adrian Schenker, “*kōper* et expiation,” *Biblica* 63 (1982): 32–46, as well as discussion in Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 72–76.

11. Janowski, *Sühne*, 154: “Im Interesse einer sachgemäßen Erfassung nicht nur der einzelnen Bedeutungsaspekte der Wurzel כִּפָּר, sondern auch der alttestamentlichen Sühnetheologie wird darum zu fragen sein, ob die alttestamentlichen כִּפָּר-Belege nicht auf eine Bedeutung der Wurzel כִּפָּר hinweisen, die—bei aller sonstigen Differenz!—gerade für die כִּפָּר-Belege im kultischen und außerkultischen Bereich konstitutiv ist. Der älteste כִּפָּר-Beleg (Ex 21,30), der diesen Terminus unzweifelhaft als ‘ein Wort von bürgerlich-juristischer Natur’ ausweist, vermag eine erste, positive Antwort auf diese Frage zu geben.”

12. Jacob Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16* [AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991], 1082–83) lists no less than seven different contexts in which he sees כִּפָּר functioning as a denominative of כִּפָּר.

13. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1082. The last line of the above actually reads as follows: “Therefore, there exists a strong possibility that all texts that assign to *kippēr* the function of averting God’s

Second, the verb כָּפַר is frequently followed by the verb סָלַח (“to forgive”) in contexts of sin: “and the priest will atone for them and they will be forgiven” (וַיִּכַּפֵּר עֲלֵהֶם הַכֹּהֵן וְנִסְלַח לָהֶם) (Lev 4:20; see also Lev 4:26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18, 26 [ET 6:7]; 19:22; Num 15:25 [cf. v. 26], 28). This is significant because the term סָלַח can refer to the acceptance of a mitigated penalty in place of the penalty deserved, resulting in restored fellowship between the sinner and the LORD.¹⁴ This is illustrated clearly in Num 14, especially vv. 11–25.¹⁵ This is the well-known story of the Israelites’ reaction to the spies’ report. In brief, the people refuse to obey the LORD’S command to enter the Promised Land (vv. 1–10a). The LORD then appears and states that he will destroy the people (vv. 11–12). Moses responds by pleading for forgiveness: “Forgive the iniquity (סָלַח נָא לְעוֹן) of this people...” (v. 19a). The LORD grants this request, stating, “I have pardoned (סָלַחְתִּי), according to your word” (v. 20).

What is important to note is that this granting of pardon does not mean complete remission of penalty, for the LORD immediately proceeds to state that the people of Israel who doubted him would surely die before ever reaching the Promised Land (vv. 21–23)! What this is, however, is a mitigation of the original penalty. To be specific, instead of the entire nation being immediately wiped out, it is only the adults who partook in the Exodus from Egypt that are affected: they are prohibited from entering the Promised Land and will eventually die in the wilderness.¹⁶ Stated differently, by agreeing to forgive (סָלַחְתִּי, v. 20), the LORD was allowing for a כָּפַר-arrangement with the people.

In sum, forgiveness is not necessarily the remission of all penalty; it can refer to the allowance of a mitigated penalty—a כָּפַר—in place of the one deserved. This understanding of סָלַח fits very well in contexts where כָּפַר and סָלַח occur together: the sinner has breached the law of the LORD and can expect judgment to follow; instead, however, the sinner can bring a sacrifice, so that the priest can כָּפַר (i.e. effect a כָּפַר-payment) on the sinner’s behalf with the result that this mitigated penalty is accepted and the sinner is forgiven (סָלַח). To paraphrase the

wrath have *kōper* in mind: innocent [*sic*] life spared by substituting for it the guilty [*sic*] parties or their ransom.” In a private communication to the author, Milgrom states that he inadvertently switched the words “innocent” and “guilty” in the original, for which reason they are switched back in the above. (Note: *kippēr* in Milgrom’s original is likely an error, the correct form being *kipper*.)

14. It can also refer to the full remittal of an expected penalty (Num 30:6–16 [ET 5–15]; cf. esp. vv. 6, 9, 13 [ET 5, 8, 12] with v. 16 [ET 15]) or to the complete cessation of a current penalty (e.g. 1 Kgs 8:33–34; see also 1 Kgs 8:35–36, 37–39, 46–50; 2 Chr 7:13–14; Dan 9:19). In either case, it again leads to restored fellowship between the sinner and the LORD.

15. Traditionally, Num 13–14 is seen as a mixture of JE and P, with vv. 11–25 belonging to JE (see the discussion and references in Katharine D. Sakenfeld, “The Problem of Divine Forgiveness in Numbers 14,” *CBQ* 37 [1975]: 317–30 [317–20]; see also the overview and critique of the traditional approach in Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers* [TOTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1981], 124–26). Verses 11–25 are still relevant to our present discussion, however, insofar as the putative P doublet of vv. 11–25 (i.e. vv. 26–39a) does not contradict or correct the idea of forgiveness presented in vv. 11–25 in any way; rather, it simply expands on the punishment mentioned in v. 23a. For further aspects of the coherence of Num 13–14, see Wenham, *Numbers*, 124–26.

16. For the connection between סָלַח and the mitigation of the original penalty in this context, see also Stamm, *Erlösen und Vergeben*, 160.

texts in Lev 4–5: “וְכִפֶּר עֲלֵהֶם הַכֹּהֵן” (and the priest will effect a ransom payment for them) וְנִסְלַח לָהֶם (and this mitigated penalty will be accepted in place of the one deserved, i.e. they will be forgiven).¹⁷

Nonetheless, despite the fact that the verb כִּפֶּר is clearly related to כָּפַר in some instances, this understanding of the verb does not always appear to work well. Two comments may be made in this regard. First, this understanding of כִּפֶּר appears problematic in purification contexts, where no obvious sin has been committed. The woman who has had a baby, for example, offers a purification offering, by which the priest makes atonement (כִּפֶּר) for her. But why is atonement needed in this context? Indeed, the result of atonement in this instance is not forgiveness (as one might normally expect for an atoning sacrifice), but purification: “and the priest will atone for her and she will be pure” וְכִפֶּר עָלֶיהָ הַכֹּהֵן (וְנִטְהַרָהּ), Lev 12:8b; see also 14:20b, 53b). Second, in several instances the sancta appear to be the direct object of כִּפֶּר (e.g. Lev 16:20, 33; cf. Ezek 43:20, 26), and one may legitimately ask what the sense of “atoning the sancta” might be.¹⁸

“To Purify/Purge/Effect Purgation”

Recognizing these difficulties, several authors have proposed that כִּפֶּר can refer to purification, like Akkadian *kuppuru* (“to wipe off, to purify”), and can thus be translated “to purify/purge/effect purgation.”¹⁹ This understanding of כִּפֶּר finds support in four avenues.

First, the priestly literature uses words for purification, such as טָהַר and טָהַר, right alongside כִּפֶּר: “For on this day he will effect purgation for you to purify you” כִּי בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהַר אֹתְכֶם), Lev 16:30a).²⁰

Second, as mentioned above,²¹ Akkadian attests *kuppuru*, “to purify.” This is not only similar to כִּפֶּר in form (D stem of \sqrt{kpr}), it is also used in cultic texts in a way analogous to כִּפֶּר.²²

Third, translating כִּפֶּר with “to purge/effect purgation” works well in contexts of impurity, the results of which are the purification or consecration of the offerer or the sancta.

17. For interaction with Milgrom’s understanding at this point, see Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 87 n. 23.

18. Though see the discussion in *ibid.*, 188–93 (192–93).

19. The principal authors holding to this are Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1040, 1080–82, and Levine, *Presence of the Lord*, 56–61 (Levine further notes [p. 56] that a connection between כִּפֶּר and *kuppuru* was favored by Gray; see George Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1925], 67–73). Though not appealing to the Akkadian, Gerleman understands כִּפֶּר to refer to a rite of sprinkling or washing (“streichen, sprengen; [ab]wischen”); see Gillis Gerleman, “Die Wurzel *kpr* im Hebräisch,” in *Studien zur alttestamentlichen Theologie* (Heidelberg: L. Schneider, 1980), 11–23. For a summary of the discussion on *kapāru* (D stem *kuppuru*), as well as a survey of relevant texts, see Janowski, *Sühne*, 29–60, and Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 3 n. 7.

20. See also Lev 14:52–53: “Thus [the priest] shall decontaminate (וְנִטְהַר) the house with the blood of the bird and with the running water...so he shall כִּפֶּר for the house (וְכִפֶּר עַל-הַבַּיִת), and it shall be clean (וְנִטְהַר)” (Lev 14:52–53).

21. See above, n. 19.

22. See Levine, *Presence of the Lord*, 60.

Finally, this understanding of כִּפֵּר works well when כִּפֵּר is followed by the definite direct object marker, for example, “He shall purge/purify the holiest part of the sanctuary (וְכִפֵּר אֶת־מִקְדָּשׁ הַקִּדְשׁ), and he shall purge/purify the Tent of Meeting and the altar (וְאֶת־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ יְכַפֵּר)...” (Lev 16:33a).²³

These authors do not claim that כִּפֵּר should always be translated with “to purify” or “to effect purgation.” Recognizing that this translation does not work in every context, they translate כִּפֵּר with “to purify/effect purgation” in some instances and with “to atone/expiate” or “to make atonement/expiation” in other instances. In short, there are two different translations possible and context must decide which one to use.

While this understanding appears helpful in approaching the verb כִּפֵּר, it turns out that it can be very difficult to choose between these two translations, as evidenced by certain tensions in the work of those who follow this approach. One example of this is found in Milgrom’s comments on Num 35:31–33.²⁴ These verses state that no act of כִּפֵּר can be made for land defiled by bloodshed, except the shedding of the slayer’s blood. Milgrom understands כִּפֵּר in this verse to refer to the ransom principle, which seems justified on the basis of כִּפֵּר in vv. 31 and 32.²⁵ And yet the text could not be clearer that shed blood pollutes (רָחַק, Hiphil, v. 33) and defiles (טָמֵא, Piel, v. 34) the land, suggesting that the act of כִּפֵּר must not only ransom, but also cleanse (a point to which we return in some detail below).²⁶ How do we resolve this tension? If we argue that Milgrom has simply put the text in the wrong category, and that כִּפֵּר here refers to “effecting purgation,” we have not resolved the dilemma, since then we are failing to account for the obvious “ransom” elements present in the passage (כִּפֵּר in vv. 31 and 32). Perhaps instead, then, we should ask the question: Should the tension between ransom and purification be solved one way or the other, *or are there elements of both involved in the concept of כִּפֵּר?* Stated differently: Is it possible that כִּפֵּר refers to a certain type of purgation, namely, to כִּפֵּר-purgation? The answer to this question may be found in a more careful consideration of how sin and impurity are related to one another. It is to the relationship between sin and impurity that we now turn.

The Relationship Between Sin and Impurity

On the one hand, it is clear that sin and impurity are not the same thing.²⁷ On the other hand, however, it is also clear that the priestly literature understands sin

23. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1011. See also Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (JPS Torah Commentary; New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989), 110; Gordon J. Wenham, *Leviticus* (NICOT 3; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979), 227; NJPS.

24. For a different example, this time from Levine, see the discussion in Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 4–5.

25. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1082.

26. See the discussion below, “Numbers 35.”

27. Klawans, who discusses the relationship between sin and impurity in terms of “moral impurity” and “ritual impurity,” identifies five main differences between the two (Jonathan Klawans,

and impurity to be closely related. The Day of Atonement rituals, for example, were meant to atone (כִּפֹּר) for both sin *and* impurity: "...thus [the priest] shall make atonement (וְכִפֹּר) for the holy place, because of the *impurities* (מִטְמָאוֹת) of the people of Israel, and because of their *transgressions* (וּמִפְשְׁעֵיהֶם), all their *sins* (לְכָל-חַטָּאוֹתָם)..." (Lev 16:16a). Moreover, several texts speak of *sins* which have a *polluting* effect: "Do not *defile yourselves* (אַל-תִּטְמְאוּ) by any of these [sexual *sins*], for by all these the nations I am casting out before you *defiled themselves* (וַתִּטְמְאוּ הָאֻמִּים)"; and the land *became defiled* (וַתִּטְמָא הָאָרֶץ)..." (Lev 18:24–25a; see also 20:3). And finally, people are not *purified* simply of *impurities*, but also of *sins*: "For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to *purify you* (לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם); *from all your sins you shall be pure* before the LORD (מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תִּטְהָרוּ)" (Lev 16:30). Clearly, then, sin and impurity are closely related.

While there are various similarities between sin and impurity that may be identified,²⁸ the most relevant to our present discussion is as follows: in contexts that require כִּפֹּר, sin not only endangers, it also defiles, while impurity not only defiles, it also endangers. This may be demonstrated in the following observations.

Sin Endangers

There is little doubt that sin in the priestly system endangers the sinner. This is most obviously the case with intentional sin, which consistently calls for death,²⁹ *kareth*,³⁰ or "bearing one's sin" (i.e. being punished for it).³¹

It is also important to note, however, that inadvertent sin—which is addressed by means of כִּפֹּר—also endangered insofar as it would result in severe penalty if not addressed properly. The fact that inadvertent sin endangered is supported by three factors. First, Lev 4:3 envisions a situation in which the high priest commits an inadvertent sin but does not bring a sacrifice because he is unaware of it (cf. v. 13). The result of this inadvertent sin is suffering for the people: "If it is the anointed priest who so does wrong to the detriment of the people (לְאִשְׁמֶרֶת לְהָעָם)..."³² Inadvertent sin, therefore, does not mean the absence of punitive consequences. Second, Lev 17:11 suggests that these punitive consequences

Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 26). For further discussion of the relationship between sin and impurity, see Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, Chapter 5. Klawans is discussed on pp. 144–50.

28. See again discussion in Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, Chapter 5.

29. Exod 28:35, 43; 30:20–21; 31:14–15; 35:2; Lev 8:35; 19:20, etc.

30. Exod 30:33, 38; 31:14; Lev 7:20, 21; 17:4, 9; 18:29, etc.

31. Exod 28:43; Lev 7:18; 17:16; 19:17; 20:20; 24:15; Num 9:13, etc. For discussion, see Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 11–25.

32. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 226. Milgrom (ibid., 232) has noted that the sin of the priest does not simply make the people guilty, it also endangers them: "That priestly misconduct can harm the community is explicitly stated: 'Do not dishevel your hair and do not rend your clothes, lest you die and *anger strike the whole community*' (10:6; cf. Gen 20:9, 17–18)." The sense of אִשְׁמָה in this passage is therefore consequential. See further Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 25–41.

could be severe. This verse states that the blood of atoning sacrifice serves to ransom the life of the sinner,³³ which naturally implies that the life of the sinner is at risk. Since, however, the principal context of atoning sacrifice is inadvertent sin, the implication is that it is the life of the *inadvertent* sinner that is at risk, and that sacrifice is the means by which to deliver the inadvertent sinner from this danger.³⁴ In further support it may finally be noted that it was possible to commit a sin inadvertently that would result in severe consequences if done intentionally, for example, eating the meat of fellowship offerings while unclean (Lev 7:20). If one committed such a sin inadvertently and was then made aware of it or became aware of it, but refused to bring the appropriate sacrifice, the natural inference is that such a person would suffer the consequences that this sin normally calls for, namely, *kareth*. One does not *have* to suffer *kareth* if this is done inadvertently, but this is only because a sacrifice may be offered instead. Stated differently, sacrifice allows the inadvertent sinner to escape the danger caused by their sin.

In short, sin—whether intentional or inadvertent—endangers.

Sin Pollutes

Second, sin also pollutes. This is evident on the one hand from the verses mentioned above, where sin is described as defiling (Lev 18:24–25a; 20:3; Num 35:33–34a) and as in need of being cleansed (Lev 16:30). It is evident on the other hand from the fact that inadvertent sins requiring a purification offering (and thus כִּפּוּר) pollute the sanctuary and its sancta. The fact that sin pollutes the sanctuary and its sancta finds support in two considerations.

First, it is clear that sins which do not involve direct contact with the sanctuary can still lead to its pollution. In Lev 20:3, for example, the LORD states that the one who gives their child to Molech is guilty of “defiling (שִׁדְדָה) my sanctuary and profaning my holy name.”³⁵ It is therefore possible that the sins of Lev 4 and 5 also result in the defiling of the sanctuary. Second, this possibility is strengthened by the fact that one function of the purification offering is the cleansing of the sanctuary and its sancta (Lev 16:16, 19, 33; see also 8:15). For this reason, the requirement of the purification offering in contexts such as Lev 4:1–5:13 suggests that the sins here have resulted in the pollution of the sanctuary, and that כִּפּוּר, at least in the context of the purification offering in Lev 4:1–5:13, could also refer to the cleansing of the sanctuary. Indeed, in Lev 4:1–5:13 the blood of the purification offering is put upon the horns of the altar, an act

33. Levine, *Leviticus*, 115, and *Presence of the Lord*, 67–68; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 707–8, and *Leviticus 17–22* (AB 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1474; Schwartz, “Prohibitions,” 55 and n. 1; Wenham, *Leviticus*, 115; Philip J. Budd, *Leviticus* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 248.

34. Milgrom’s attempt to limit this verse to the “fellowship” (or “peace”) offering (*Leviticus 1–16*, 706–13; *Leviticus 17–22*, 1472–79) has not gained widespread acceptance. For a critique, see (among others) Schwartz, “Prohibitions,” 58–60, and Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 174–79.

35. Noted by Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 257.

which elsewhere clearly refers to cleansing the sanctuary and/or its sancta (Lev 8:15; cf. 16:18–19).

In sum, then, when כִּפֶּר is required in a context of sin, it appears that the sin both *endangers* and *pollutes*, implying that the כִּפֶּר-rite must both *ransom* and *cleanse*.

Impurity Pollutes

Naturally, there is no question that impurity pollutes. As this relates to the verb כִּפֶּר, however, it may be noted that this verb occurs in a purification context with reference to cleansing a person or object from a “major” impurity. For this reason, it is helpful to provide a brief outline of the various grades of impurities in order to set the context of the discussion.

Impurities may be placed on a continuum between two poles: minor impurities and major impurities.³⁶ These poles are determined based on the type of rite required for cleansing, the duration of the impurity, and the degree of its contagion.³⁷ Minor impurities are those which are typically cleansed via bathing and/or laundering,³⁸ which last one day, and which are not contagious. People or objects with minor impurities include those who have touched or carried an unclean carcass (Lev 11:24–28), those who have been touched by a corpse-defiled person (Num 19:22), those who have entered, slept, or eaten in a diseased house (Lev 14:46–47), and those who have had intercourse (Lev 15:18).³⁹

By way of contrast, major impurities require various other rites for cleansing. Thus alongside of bathing and laundering we also find shaving, sprinkling with the water for impurity, anointing with oil or blood, and the sprinkling of blood.⁴⁰ Most importantly, the cleansing of a major impurity always involves sacrifice, something that is never found with a minor impurity. Stated differently, major impurities and sacrificial כִּפֶּר go together. The significance of this becomes evident as we turn to consider the next point, namely, that major impurity not only defiles, it also endangers.

Impurity Endangers

Two considerations are worthy of note in this regard. First, as Milgrom has argued, those who suffer from a major impurity defile the sanctuary and its sancta, even if they have not had direct contact with them. This is evident from the following: (1) the tabernacle is defiled from impurities in the adytum, even

36. The word “continuum” is used above due to the impurity of the corpse-contaminated person and menstruant, which falls in between minor and major impurities. See Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 128 n. 69.

37. So Philip Peter Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (JSOTSup 106; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 225–26.

38. The word “typically” is used because in some instances it is not clear that the person had to bathe or launder, only that they had to wait until sunset (see Lev 11:24, 27).

39. For a comprehensive list of those with minor impurities, see Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 225.

40. We also find that the metallic items from the spoil are to be passed through the fire as well as sprinkled with the “water for impurity” (מַי כִּפֶּרֶת, Num 31:21–24).

though no one is allowed in there (Lev 16:16);⁴¹ and (2) those suffering from a major impurity must bring a purification offering; since the blood of this offering has a purifying function (Lev 8:15), and since it is placed upon the sanctuary and its sancta, it follows that the sanctuary and its sancta have been polluted by the major impurity and are in need of cleansing.⁴²

This leads to the second consideration, namely, that the defiling of sancta is a sin of the most serious consequences in the priestly literature. Thus the priests are warned, “If any one of all your descendants throughout your generations approaches the holy things, which the people of Israel dedicate to the LORD, while he has an impurity, that person shall be cut off from my presence: I am the LORD” (Lev 22:3). Again, after a series of warnings to the priests about not approaching the holy gifts while impure, we read: “They shall therefore keep my charge, lest they bear sin for it and die thereby when they profane it: I am the LORD who sanctifies them” (22:9).⁴³

In short, it is not simply that the person has a major impurity. Rather, through their major impurity they have also (inadvertently) defiled sancta, a sin of the most serious consequences.⁴⁴ It thus stands to reason that the verb כִּפֶּר in these contexts does not simply refer to cleansing; in keeping with its use elsewhere in

41. Jacob Milgrom, “Israel’s Sanctuary: The Priestly Picture of Dorian Gray,” *RB* 83 (1976): 390–99 (394).

42. Milgrom, “Israel’s Sanctuary,” 391. For how this relates to Lev 15:31, see the discussion in Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 129–30 n. 71.

43. See also the warnings of Num 3:10; 8:19; 18:3–5, 7, 22.

44. True, it was never the intent of the parturient, leper, or the one suffering from a flow to defile the sanctuary or its sancta. This is granted. Nonetheless, even the *inadvertent* defiling of sancta was considered sinful, as is made clear by the case of the Nazirite in Num 6: “And if a person dies very suddenly (בְּפִתְעָא פְּתֹאֵת) beside him [i.e. the Nazirite], and he defiles his consecrated head, then he shall shave his head on the day of his cleansing; on the seventh day he shall shave it. On the eighth day he shall bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons to the priest to the door of the Tent of Meeting, and the priest shall offer one for a purification offering and the other for a burnt offering, and make atonement for him, *because he sinned* by reason of the dead body (וְכִפֶּר עָלָיו מֵאֲשֶׁר) and make atonement for him, *because he sinned* by reason of the dead body (וְכִפֶּר עָלָיו מֵאֲשֶׁר) (Num 6:9–11a).

The situation envisaged here is one in which the holy head of the Nazirite has been defiled by corpse contamination. The inadvertency of the situation is indicated by the suddenness of the death (פְּתֹאֵת בְּפִתְעָא), that is, the Nazirite did not purposefully expose himself to corpse contamination; instead, the event came about unexpectedly and in a manner outside of his control. Nonetheless, from the priestly perspective, the Nazirite has sinned, and is in need of atonement: “...and [the priest will] make atonement for [the Nazirite], *because he sinned* by reason of the dead body (וְכִפֶּר עָלָיו מֵאֲשֶׁר) (v. 11). Granted, the sin in view in this instance is the defiling of the Nazirite’s head, and the text does not explicitly address the defiling of the sanctuary itself or its sancta. Nonetheless, the fact remains from this passage that the inadvertent defiling of a holy item (the Nazirite’s head) was considered a sin in the priestly system, and therefore in need of redressing. Given that major impurities also defile holy items (namely, the sanctuary and its sancta), it may be concluded that those suffering from a major impurity are in a similar position as the Nazirite, namely, as those who have sinned inadvertently. As a result, it would seem that כִּפֶּר in these contexts refers not only to an act of purgation, as argued above, but that it also refers to the principle of כִּפֶּר (“ransom”), in keeping with its use in contexts of inadvertent sin elsewhere.

the context of inadvertent sin, it also refers to ransom (כִּפָּר).⁴⁵ Stated differently, major impurities do not only *defile*, they also *endanger*, and thus the כִּפָּר-rite must *cleanse* the impurity (purgation) and *rescue* the endangered person (כִּפָּר).⁴⁶

In sum, major impurities that require כִּפָּר not only pollute, they also endanger, while inadvertent sins requiring כִּפָּר not only endanger, they also pollute. This suggests that the כִּפָּר-rite in each context effects both “ransom” and “purgation,” that is, that כִּפָּר refers to כִּפָּר-purgation.⁴⁷ The possibility of this understanding of כִּפָּר finds support in two further avenues.

כִּפָּר as כִּפָּר-Purgation

The Dual Function of Blood

First, sacrificial blood is presented as that which both purifies and ransoms. The purifying power of sacrificial blood is evident in various texts where it cleanses the altar: “Next Moses slaughtered [the purification offering bull] and *took the blood* and with his finger put [some of it] around on the horns of the altar, and purified (וַיְחַטֵּא) the altar” (Lev 8:15a); “With his finger he shall *sprinkle some of the blood on it* seven times and *cleanse it* (וַיְטַהַרֲרֵהוּ)...” (16:19a).

The ransoming power of blood is also evident. Most clear in this regard is Lev 17:11, where the LORD says of sacrificial blood: “I have given it [i.e. the blood] upon the altar to ransom your lives (לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם)...” (17:11aβ). It is commonly agreed that the atonement referred to by the verb כִּפָּר in this verse is characterized by ransom,⁴⁸ and the flow of the verse makes clear that it is the blood that is the ransom payment. In further support of the ransoming power of blood we may refer to the discussion above concerning the verb כָּלַח, which is used in Lev 4–5 to express the acceptance of a mitigated penalty (a “ransom”) in lieu of the one deserved. Since this forgiveness resulted from the כִּפָּר-rite, the

45. See the discussion above.

46. It may be noted in this regard that כִּפָּר is distinct from other verbs for cleansing (such as טָהַר and חָטָא), insofar as it is tied to sacrificial blood in a way that other verbs are not (for elaboration on this point, see Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 112–15). This is especially important to note because of the connection between sacrificial blood and כִּפָּר elsewhere (see the discussion below on “The Dual Function of Blood” as well as “Numbers 35”). The implication is that this is not any type of purgation that is taking place; this is כִּפָּר-purgation. See further *ibid.*, 153–57.

47. It is possible that in some contexts the focus of the כִּפָּר-rite is upon cleansing (e.g. Lev 12:8: “...and the priest will make atonement for her, and she shall be pure”), while in other contexts the focus of the כִּפָּר-rite is upon ransom (e.g. Lev 4:20: “So the priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven”). In either context, however, the impure person and the sinner are in need of both cleansing and ransom, and it is for this reason that the כִּפָּר-rite—which has both כִּפָּר and purgation in view—is called for. See the previous note.

48. See n. 33 above. This finds support in the phrase לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם in v. 11aβ, which occurs in only two other instances (Exod 30:15–16; Num 31:50), and which has the meaning “to ransom your lives” both times. As noted by Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16*, 708), this is especially clear in Exod 30, where the phrase עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם in vv. 15–16 is paralleled a few verses earlier with the phrase כִּפָּר נַפְשׁוֹ, “a ransom for his life” (v. 12). That לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵינִי refers to a ransom in Num 31:50 is demonstrated by the fact that the context is the same as Exod 30, namely, the taking of a census.

implication was that the *כִּפֹּר*-rite effected a ransom payment on behalf of the sinner. Significantly, a central part of the *כִּפֹּר*-rite in Lev 4–5 is the manipulation of the blood upon the altar (cf. Lev 17:11), suggesting again that blood is central to the effecting of ransom (and that *כִּפֹּר* in Lev 4 and 5 is actually used in consonance with the understanding of *כִּפֹּר* in Lev 17:11).

In sum, blood has both the power to ransom and to purify, which further supports the possibility that the verb *כִּפֹּר* may refer to *כִּפֹּר*-purgation.

Numbers 35

This understanding of the verb is confirmed further by the use of *כִּפֹּר* in Num 35:30–34.⁴⁹ Numbers 35:9–29 deals with the cities of refuge and who may legitimately go there, namely, those who have unintentionally slain another. Verses 30–34, which conclude the chapter, read as follows:

If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses; but no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness. Moreover you shall accept no ransom (*כִּפֹּר*) for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death; but the murderer shall be put to death. And you shall accept no ransom (*כִּפֹּר*) for the one who has fled to their city of refuge, that they may return to dwell in the land before the death of the priest. You shall not thus pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it (*וְלֹאֲרֹץ לֹא־יִכַפֵּר לָדָם אֲשֶׁר שָׁפַךְ בָּהּ*), except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.

The thrust of the passage is straightforward. Verse 30 states that a murderer must be executed, provided there is more than one witness to the crime.⁵⁰ Verse 31 then states that when a person is found to be guilty of murder, that no ransom payment (*כִּפֹּר*) can be accepted on their behalf. Though not stated here, a ransom payment was often given in the form of money.⁵¹ Verse 32 goes on to clarify that a ransom payment cannot be accepted even when the murder was unintentional, and thus even the unintentional slayer is not allowed to leave his

49. It is granted that this passage is not a sacrificial context, even though an inadvertent sin is addressed (v. 32; see vv. 22–25). The reason for the absence of sacrifice appears to be that the inadvertent sin of murder is so serious that not even animal sacrifice can atone for it; only the blood of the slayer, or the death (and therefore lifeblood) of the high priest, will do (vv. 25, 28, 32–33). The passage is still relevant to the present discussion, however, insofar as it is using the verb *כִּפֹּר* in the context of an inadvertent sin which pollutes.

50. On the execution of the murderer, see Gen 9:6; Exod 21:12–14; Lev 24:12.

51. For a narrative example of *כִּפֹּר* in the context of murder, see 2 Sam 21:1–9, where the land is suffering a famine because of Saul's slaying of the Gibeonites (v. 1). As a result, David calls the Gibeonites and asks them, "What should I do for you? And with what can I effect ransom (*וְכִפֹּר וְכִפֹּר*) that you may bless the heritage of the LORD?" (v. 3). The fact that David was offering a payment of money is evident from the Gibeonites' response: "It is not a matter of *silver* or *gold* between us and Saul or his house..." (v. 4). In the end, the only ransom suitable—as in Num 35:33—was blood, namely, that of Saul's sons (v. 6). Though not in the context of murder, see also Exod 30:11–16, where the phrase *כִּפֹּר תַּכִּיפֵהוּ* (Exod 30:12), which is paralleled in our text by *כִּפֹּר תַּכִּיפֵהוּ* (Num 35:31), is a payment of a half shekel of silver (Exod 30:13). See the discussion in Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 48–59 for this and other *כִּפֹּר*-texts.

or her city of refuge.⁵² The reason that כִּפָּר may not be accepted is given in v. 33: murder pollutes the land. The severity of this is such that no כִּפָּר can be effected for the land by a כִּפָּר of money; it is only a כִּפָּר of blood that will כִּפָּר the land, namely, the blood of the slayer: "...for blood pollutes the land, and no כִּפָּר can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it" (וְלֹאֲדָרְיָן לֹאֲיִכְפֹּר לְדָם אֲשֶׁר שִׁפְדָּהּ בִּי־אִם בְּדָם שִׁפְכוּ, v. 33). To receive anything less than this would be to leave the pollution of the land unaddressed, a situation which was inconceivable given that the LORD dwelt in the midst of it (vv. 33–34).

The relationship between כִּפָּר and כִּפָּר in this passage is self-evident. To return to Milgrom:

There are...cases in which the ransom [i.e. כִּפָּר] principle is clearly operative. (1) The function of the census money (Exod 30:12–16) is *lĕkappēr* ‘al-napšōtēkem ‘to ransom your lives’ (Exod 30:16; cf. Num 31:50): here the verb *kippēr* must be related to the expression found in the same pericope *kōper napšō* ‘a ransom for his life’ (Exod 30:12). (2) The same combination of the idiom *kōper nepes̄* and the verb *kippēr* is found in the law of homicide (Num 35:31–33). Thus in these two cases, *kippēr* is a denominative from *kōper*, whose meaning is undisputed: ‘ransom’ (cf. Exod 21:30).⁵³

In this instance, a normal כִּפָּר (i.e. a payment of money) was insufficient to effect כִּפָּר for the land; only a כִּפָּר of blood (i.e. the blood of the slayer) would suffice. In executing the slayer, and thus effecting כִּפָּר, the sufficient ransom for the land would be paid and its defilement would be taken care of.

What is particularly important to note, however, is that while כִּפָּר here does refer to the payment of a suitable ransom, *the intended result of the כִּפָּר-action*—that is, the payment of a suitable כִּפָּר—is *that of cleansing*, since it is the *pollution* and *defilement* of the land that is being addressed (vv. 33–34). In short, it appears that כִּפָּר here refers to the effecting of a ransom payment which has purgative results.⁵⁴ This adds still further support to the argument above that the verb כִּפָּר may be used to refer to כִּפָּר-purgation.

52. That is, until the death of the high priest (see vv. 25, 28).

53. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1082.

54. In an important article on Lev 17:11, Schwartz (“Prohibitions,” 56) argues that “[Lev 17:11] is the only place in which the כִּפָּר-action attributed to blood has the sense of ransom rather than purification.” Recognizing that Num 35:31–33 would also seem to use כִּפָּר in this way, Schwartz (p. 56 n. 1) offers the following comments: “In vv. 31–32...the noun כִּפָּר is, of course, ‘ransom,’ ‘payment’. In v. 33, however...the word כִּפָּר not only echoes the כִּפָּר of the preceding verses; it is also, and primarily, the antithesis of יִחַיִּיפֵי...תוֹחֵיפֵי, in which case it means ‘purge, purify.’ The play on words is that כִּפָּר ‘ransom’ cannot מְכַפֵּר ‘purify’ the land of the blood of the innocent; only the blood of the homicide can accomplish this.”

In this way Schwartz holds that כִּפָּר in v. 33 refers solely to purification.

While Schwartz’s article as a whole is extremely insightful, the above comments may be questioned on two grounds. First, even leaving Num 35 aside, it does not seem to be the case that Lev 17:11 is the only verse where the כִּפָּר-action attributed to blood refers to ransom (see the comments above on כִּפָּר and קָלַח in Lev 4–5). (Schwartz has followed Milgrom on the translation of כִּפָּר in Lev 4–5, understanding the purification offering to be that which cleanses the tabernacle from impurity but which does not atone for the initial inadvertent sin itself. This understanding of the purification offering, however, is problematic to the context of Lev 4–5; see Sklar, *Sin, Impurity*,

Summary

This essay has attempted to answer the question: Why does the verb כָּפַר occur in contexts of inadvertent sin *and* major impurity? The answer, briefly stated, is that inadvertent sins and major impurities share this in common: both endanger (requiring ransom) and both pollute (requiring purification). The verb כָּפַר occurs in both contexts because it refers to כָּפַר-purgation, with the blood of the sacrifice serving both to ransom and to purify.

Sacrifice, Atonement, 87 n. 23. For a more thorough critique of Milgrom's understanding of the purification offering, see now Roy E. Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005], especially Chapter 6.)

Second, Schwartz has correctly identified that one element of כָּפַר in Num 35:33 is that of purification. More problematic, however, is his concluding statement: "The play on words is that כָּפַר 'ransom' cannot מְכַפֵּר 'purify' the land of the blood of the innocent; only the blood of the homicide can accomplish this." There are two issues here which must be addressed. First, this statement is not specific enough, since it is important to note that the text is not referring at this point to a כָּפַר in general but to a כָּפַר of money (cf. 2 Sam 21:3-6 and discussion above in n. 51; see also the use of כָּפַר elsewhere, e.g., Exod 21:28-32; 30:11-16). The text is thus not claiming that a כָּפַר cannot cleanse the land of blood pollution, only that a כָּפַר of money cannot. This leads to the second problem: this statement introduces a false disjunction into the text between ransom and cleansing, assuming that the verb can refer only to one or the other. The context, however, suggests that both are in view, as Schwartz himself seems to recognize in his very preceding statement: "In v. 33...the word כָּפַר: *not only echoes* the כָּפַר of the preceding verses; it is also, and primarily, the antithesis of הִנִּיחַ...הִחַיֵּיפוּ, in which case it means 'purge, purify'" ("Prohibitions," 56 n. 1; emphasis added). It is this very "echo" that is the point: the atoning that is taking place here is one which both "ransoms" and "cleanses" the land, something that blood is able to do since it fulfills both of these functions (see the discussion above on "The Dual Function of Blood"). In short, it is a ransom payment that has purgative results, suggesting again that כָּפַר here refers to כָּפַר-purgation.