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Roy E. Gane
Andrews University

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Recommended Citation

Gane, Roy E., "Legal Substitution and Experiential Transformation in the Typology of Leviticus, Part 1" (2013). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 48.
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Roy Gane, PhD, serves as professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern languages, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



Legal substitution *and* experiential transformation in the typology of **Leviticus**: Part 1¹

Some Christians emphasize the idea that Christ's sacrifice accomplished a legal substitution, but they largely overlook the effect of experiential transformation. Others do the opposite, emphasizing a change of experience resulting from Christ's sacrifice, but downplaying the concept that Christ served as our Substitute.

The present research demonstrates that in the typology of the book of Leviticus, which serves as a background to the explanation of Christ's sacrifice in the book of Hebrews, both legal substitution and experiential transformation are clearly present and fully necessary. In part 1 of this two-part article, we will examine the evidence for legal substitution in Leviticus and identify some references to this dynamic in Hebrews. In part 2, we will explore experiential transformation in Leviticus and point out this element in Hebrews.

Background

Legal in this context does not mean "legalistic." Rather, *legal* has to do with a person's relationship to God as this relationship is affected by a failure to follow principles that are in harmony with His character of love (1 John 4:8), as expressed in His law. Such legal problems caused by illegal activities,

which we call sin, are objective in the sense that when they are already done, they cannot be changed because they are historical events. The penalty for committing sin is death (Rom. 6:23) because sin is transgression of God's law (1 John 3:4), which is unselfish love (Matt. 22:37-40). Love is the only principle on the basis of which intelligent beings with free choice can live in harmony and not destroy each other.² So, preservation of the society requires that those who violate love must cease to exist. However, the very same love of God that condemns sinners motivates Him to want to save us. "For God so loved the world," that is, all lost inhabitants of planet Earth (John 3:16). On what basis can He extend mercy and at the same time preserve His justice, which is the other side of His love (Exod. 34:6, 7; Ps. 85:10)?

Sinners are already condemned, so there is nothing that they can offer to God to justify their deliverance from destruction (Ps. 49:7-9). Neither can the human race be spared by simply destroying the sinners among us, as Phinehas "purged" Israel by spearing Zimri and his Midianite girlfriend (Num. 25). The Hebrew verb for "purged" here is *kipper* (Pi'el of *kpr*), which is usually translated as "make atonement" (v. 13). This purging spared the community

from a divine plague (vv. 7, 8, 11). It was *kipper* in the basic sense of removing a problem between two parties, in this case between Israel and God, in order to allow for the possibility of reconciliation, which defines the English word *atonement* (at-one-ment).³ If God applied the approach of Phinehas to the whole human race, this world would have become extinct long ago because "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23).

To save us, God needs a solution that removes our blame for sin, which gets in the way of our relationship to Him, the only One who can sustain our lives (e.g., Dan. 5:23). But ordinary *kipper* will not work because that would wipe out the entire human race. So, He uses a special kind of *kipper* strategy: ransom through legal substitution. The Lord illustrated this ransom in sacrifices performed at the ancient Israelite sanctuary. He appointed priests to officiate the sacrifices of the Israelites for them, thereby showing that they could not gain ransom on their own. While they participated in some parts of the sacrifices that they offered as individuals (Lev. 1-4, etc.), only the priests performed the sacrifices that were on behalf of the entire community, such as the morning and evening burnt offerings and additional sacrifices on Sabbaths, new

moons, and festival occasions (Lev. 16, 23; Num. 28, 29).

The following sections first investigate ransom through legal substitution in the sanctuary system of Leviticus and related passages, and then look at Christ's greater substitution as argued in the book of Hebrews.

Ransom

In Exodus 30, the Lord required Israelites to give Him half a shekel of silver each when a military census counted them. The half-shekel tax served as a ransom (*koper*) for the life (*nepesh*) of each one who paid it, "that there may be no plague among them when you number them" (v. 12, NKJV). This ransom for life was to spare Israelite men from death (cf. Num. 16:49; 25:9; 2 Sam. 24:15). The Hebrew word for "ransom" is the noun *koper* from the same root as the verb *kipper*. Exodus 30 also uses the verb to express the lifesaving function of the half-shekel tax: "to ransom (*kipper*) your lives (plural of *nepesh*)" (vv. 15, 16).⁴

By itself, the verb *kipper* refers to expiation, that is, removal (*ex-*) of something that gets in the way of the divine-human relationship in order to make forgiveness possible (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, etc.).⁵ However, when *kipper* is on behalf of human life (*nepesh*), the expiation removes something that threatens the life.⁶ Without removal of this threat by payment of a ransom (*koper*), the human life would die. So, in this context, the meaning of *kipper* goes beyond "expiate" and includes the idea "to ransom."

A ransom is a payment that removes an obstacle to someone's freedom. If it is a ransom for life, the deliverance is from death.⁷ William Gilders points out that ransom for life is not necessarily by substitution. The half shekel of silver served as a ransom to free a person from harm, but it did not take the place of the person to suffer that harm.⁸

Substitution

Leviticus 17:11 explains that the blood of an animal sacrifice ransoms human life: "For the life (*nepesh*) of

a creature is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you on the altar to ransom (*kipper*) your lives (plural of *nepesh*), for the blood ransoms (*kipper*) by means of the life (*nepesh*)."⁹ In its context, this verse supplies the reason for the permanent prohibition against eating the meat of any animal from which the blood is not drained out when the animal is slaughtered (vv. 10, 12).¹⁰ There are two reasons why God forbids people to eat meat with the blood still in it. First, the blood contains the life in the sense that blood sustains life. Second, God has given the lifeblood of sacrificial animals the function of ransoming the lives of the humans on whose behalf they are offered.¹¹ This function is a gift of God to His people.¹²

The two reasons are not separate. Logically, the second depends upon the first. Because the life is in the blood, God has provided it as the means of ransoming human life. Therefore, the life of the sacrificial victim ransoms the life of the human offerer. Lest there is any doubt, the last part of the verse adds, "for the blood ransoms by means of the life" (v. 11). That is, it is not simply the blood that ransoms; the life in the blood is the means of ransom. The exchange is animal life (*nepesh*) for human life (*nepesh*).

Here the blood ransom for life is not only a payment that delivers from harm like the half shekel of silver in Exodus 30. Nor is it only a payment of damages that makes reconciliation possible and prevents punishment, as when an individual gives something he owns to another person whom he has wronged (e.g., Gen. 32:13–20; Exod. 21:22, 32–36). Rather, there is a substitution of one life for another. The animal suffers death in place of the human who would otherwise die. This is ransom through substitution, as William Gilders has recognized.¹³

The death from which human life is ransomed

If an Israelite was caught committing a crime that was punishable by death, he could not escape execution by offering an animal sacrifice.¹⁴ So,

how could sacrifices be regarded as ransoming life when they did not really ransom life? Ransom for life implies that the offerer should die unless the animal dies instead. However, an Israelite who was eligible to offer a sacrifice was not a person who deserved execution—at least not according to the system of penalties that were to be carried out by the community. Nevertheless, fully obeying God's covenant requirements is a life-and-death matter. The Israelites acknowledged that when they heard the Book of the Covenant, they pledged to obey all that the Lord had spoken, and then allowed Moses to toss the blood of the covenant sacrifice on them (Exod. 24:7, 8). So, forgiveness for violating God's commands required ransom for life through the blood of a sacrifice at His covenant headquarters where He resided and where the record of His covenant requirements was kept (Exod. 40).¹⁵

Since the Fall (Gen. 3), all human beings are faulty, even when they have no present need of forgiveness for particular acts of sin. Therefore, Israelites needed application of sacrificial blood to the altar on their behalf even when they approached the holy, immortal Deity through well-being offerings (so-called peace or fellowship offerings) for happy motivations of thanksgiving, fulfillment of vows, or voluntary expressions of devotion (Lev. 7:11, 12, 16).¹⁶ Human faultiness leads to death. This concept was reinforced by sacrifices that expiated for Israelites to purify them from physical ritual impurities (Lev. 12). These impurities were not sinful actions for which they needed forgiveness (e.g., Lev. 12:7; 14:19, 20; 15:15, 30). Rather, they emphasized the birth-to-death cycle of mortality that has resulted from sin (cf. Rom. 6:23).¹⁷

Animal life inadequate to ransom human life

How can the life of an animal, represented by its lifeblood, ransom the life of a human being? Israelites did not regard the life of an animal as equivalent to that of a human, and neither did divine law. For example,

Leviticus 24:21 states, “One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death” (NRSV). Because the life of an animal is worth less than that of a human, it is actually impossible for animal blood to ransom human life, as Hebrews 10:4 recognizes.

Psalm 49:7–9 goes a logical step further: “Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should

assigned this function to animal blood applied to His altar. The ransom is through a substitute, but not a substitute of equivalent worth. It is only a token ransom.

Token ransom does not satisfy the claim of justice. This kind of ransom is radically tilted in the direction of mercy. Therefore, God, as Judge, bears an accumulating burden of responsibility for forgiving sinners, which a judge is not supposed to do (Deut. 25:1; 1 Kings 8:32). This burden accumulates

offering (so-called sin offering) on behalf of the community: “Why didn’t you eat the purification offering in the holy area? For it is most holy, and it was assigned to you for bearing (*nasa*) the blame leading to punishment (*awon*) of the community, by making expiation on their behalf before the Lord?”²⁰

Outside Leviticus, there are other passages in which the high priest or all the priests bear blame leading to punishment that the people of their community would otherwise bear

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live on forever and never see the pit” (ESV). When it comes to eternal life, ransom for a person cannot be obtained at the cost of a human being, let alone property such as an animal or even many herds of animals (cf. Mic. 6:7). The closest the Israelite ritual system comes to human sacrifice is the burning of a Nazirite’s shaved hair in the fire under a well-being offering (Num. 6:18). But the hair offering accompanies a group of animal sacrifices (vv. 14–17, 19, 20); it does not replace them.

While it is true that Leviticus 17:11 speaks of animal sacrifice in language referring to ransom for human life, it is also true that such a sacrifice costs the offerer something: his or her animal (see 2 Sam. 24:24). However, the ransom occurs only because God has

until the Day of Atonement, Israel’s Judgment Day, when it is removed from God, as represented by purification of His sanctuary headquarters (Lev. 16).¹⁸

Priestly substitution

In Leviticus 5:1, a person who sins bears (*nasa*) his own blame that leads to punishment (*awon*).¹⁹ However, that condemnation is removed if God forgives the sin (v. 6), and then God bears it (Exod. 34:7; also *nasa*’ *awon*, usually translated “forgiving iniquity”). As God’s representatives, Israelite priests represented His role by bearing the blame of the people when they ate the meat of their sacrifices. Leviticus 10:17 refers to this kind of substitution when Moses asks the newly consecrated priests about the inaugural purification

(Exod. 28:38; Num. 18:1).²¹ However, the priests do not actually suffer punishment as a result.²² So substitution by human priests, like substitution by animals, does not fulfill the full claims of justice.

Numbers 35:28 provides a hint as to what full justice would look like: an Israelite who has accidentally killed someone must remain in a city of refuge until the high priest dies, at which time he may return home. So the death of the high priest has a kind of ransoming function, which is confirmed by verse 32: “And you shall accept no ransom [*koper*] for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the high priest” (ESV). This verse sees, but prohibits, the possibility that a ransom


could be paid to free the manslayer from confinement in the city of refuge. Nevertheless, the death of the high priest accomplishes the goal of such a ransom. This is not human sacrifice because the high priest dies a natural death. However, there is a kind of substitution here: the life of the high priest, rather than the life of the manslayer, for the life of the slain person (cf. v. 33).

Adequate substitution through Christ in Hebrews

In Leviticus and related biblical literature, we have found legal substitutions by animal victims and priests. These substitutions provided merciful freedom from condemnation, but they were not able to fulfill the needs of justice. There was a need for a more valuable kind of victim and for a kind of priest who would actually suffer the results of the blame that he bore on behalf of others. Passages such as Psalms 40 and 110, Isaiah 53, and Daniel 9 point to a Messianic Victim and Priest, but in the New Testament book of Hebrews we find full expression of the greater victimhood and priesthood of the Divine Christ.

Most crucial for our study is the connection in Hebrews between Christ's roles as Priest and Victim: "But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:11, 12, ESV; cf. vv. 24–26). Here Christ is qualified for His unique priesthood on our behalf because He has also served as our sacrificial Victim (see also Heb. 7:26, 27). As Aaron and his priestly descendants bore the blame of their people (Lev. 10:17), Christ has borne our blame. However, unlike those Israelite priests, Christ died as a result of the blame that He has carried for others.

Hebrews 9:28 expresses this concept: "so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many . . ." (ESV; cf. vv. 24–26; Isa. 53:4–12).

Christ meets the needs as a Victim of adequate value and as a Priest who actually suffers the punishment resulting from the blame that He bears for sinful human beings. The fact that He has borne our sins as our Priest and then died for those sins as our Victim proves beyond all question that He is our Substitute. His ransom lavishly fulfills God's need for justice, which is necessary to maintain His character of uncompromising love (Exod. 34:6, 7; Ps. 85:10). 

(Part 2 will appear in the January 2014 issue.)

- 1 This essay is adapted from a paper presented April 20, 2013, at the "Atonement Symposium," sponsored by the Adventist Theological Society and held at the Campus Hill Church, Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California.
- 2 Roy Gane, *Altar Call* (Berrien Springs, MI: Diadem, 1999), 269, 270.
- 3 See Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 194, 195, regarding *kipper* as prerequisite to reconciliation.
- 4 Translation by the author. For a similar use of *kipper* with *nepesh*, see Num. 31:50, where Israelite military officers gave an offering of booty to God to ransom their lives before the Lord because they had not lost any soldiers during the battle with the Midianites. In this way, they acknowledged and gave thanks for divine power to preserve life.
- 5 Gane, *Cult and Character*, 106, 194, 195.
- 6 For *nepesh* as "life," see Gen. 9:5; 19:17; 1 Sam. 20:1; 2 Sam. 14:7; Ezek. 22:27, etc.
- 7 The ransom metaphor is not intended to imply that God demands ransom as a kidnapper would.
- 8 William Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 175.
- 9 Draft translation by Roy Gane and William Gilders for the Common English Bible (CEB) with transliteration of Hebrew words in parentheses. Having undergone revision by editors, the published CEB translation of this verse loses the crucial idea of ransom by incorrectly rendering *kipper* as "make reconciliation" or "reconciles."
- 10 Cf. Gen. 9:4 for all humans and Acts 15:20, 29 as a membership requirement for Gentile Christians. Why is this not a membership requirement for Seventh-day Adventist Christians? Good question. See also Ellen G. White, "As a family, you are far from being free from disease. You have used the fat of animals, which God in His word expressly forbids: 'It shall be a perpetual statute for your generations throughout all your dwellings, that ye eat neither fat nor blood.' Moreover ye shall eat no manner of blood, whether it be of fowl or of beast, in any of your dwellings. Whatsoever soul it be that eateth any manner of blood, even that soul shall be cut off from his people." *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 2:61.
- 11 This was a unique aspect of Israelite sacrifices, by comparison with other ancient Near Eastern sacrifices.

- 12 Gilders, *Blood Ritual*, 169.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 175, 176.
- 14 Purification offerings (so-called sin offerings) and reparation offerings (so-called guilt offerings) expiated for sins that were inadvertent (Lev. 4), involved forgetfulness (Lev. 5:2–4), or in some cases were deliberate but not defiant (Lev. 5:1; 6:1–6). There was no sacrificial remedy for defiant ("high-handed") sins that incurred the terminal divinely administered penalty of "cutting off" (Num. 15:30, 31). Neither was there an opportunity for deliverance from execution by the human community for capital crimes, such as murder. Numbers 35:31 states, "Moreover, you shall accept no ransom [koper] for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death, but he shall be put to death" (ESV). When King David was guilty of murder and adultery, he understood that not even a burnt offering could save him from the consequences of justice (Ps. 51:16). The burnt offering was the original all-purpose sacrifice (Gen. 8:20; 22:2, 3, 6–8, 13; Job 1:5; 42:8), which presumably could cover areas of expiation outside the scope of the specialized purification and reparation offerings that were introduced when the Israelite sanctuary was established. However, burnt offerings were not alternatives to capital punishment.
- 15 This was true even if the sin was one for which the sinner could make material restitution, as in cases covered by the reparation offering (Lev. 5:14–16; 6:1–7). The restitution was necessary, but it could not remove the objective, historical fact that God's covenant law had been violated.
- 16 Ellen G. White recognized this principle: "The religious services, the prayers, the praise, the penitent confession of sin ascend from true believers as incense to the heavenly sanctuary, but passing through the corrupt channels of humanity, they are so defiled that unless purified by blood, they can never be of value with God. They ascend not in spotless purity, and unless the Intercessor, who is at God's right hand, presents and purifies all by His righteousness, it is not acceptable to God. All incense from earthly tabernacles must be moist with the cleansing drops of the blood of Christ. He holds before the Father the censor of His own merits, in which there is no taint of earthly corruption. He gathers into this censor the prayers, the praise, and the confessions of His people, and with these He puts His own spotless righteousness. Then, perfumed with the merits of Christ's propitiation, the incense comes up before God wholly and entirely acceptable. Then gracious answers are returned." *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), 344.
- 17 Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and Its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49; cf. 31, 32, 48, 50, 207, 208.
- 18 Gane, *Cult and Character*, 267–333; *Altar Call*, 185–222, 230–246. See also Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 277–288, 293–295.
- 19 Baruch Schwartz has shown that the expression *nasa' awon* metaphorically refers to legal guilt in terms of carrying it as though it is an object that is hauled around as a burden. When persons bear their own *awon*, usually translated "iniquity," the idea is "culpability," which means that the sinners deserve and may suffer any consequences. "The Bearing of Sin in the Priestly Literature," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, eds. D. P. Wright, D. N. Freedman, and A. Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 8–15.
- 20 Translation by the author.
- 21 Cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 145–147.
- 22 Priests would suffer punishment if they did not adequately guard the sanctuary, but this would be a failure on their part (Num. 18:1–7). See Milgrom, *Numbers*, 145, 146.

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