



Roy McDaniel

# ENACTING ATONEMENT

*The Narrative Logic of Sacrifice  
and Sonship in Leviticus*



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STUDIES IN  
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## Setting

### *Narrative and Theological Contexts*

**W**HAT, EXACTLY, WAS LEVITICAL SACRIFICE? And how did it “work”?<sup>1</sup> As previously noted, these questions carry significant weight in the Christian doctrine of atonement. If Levitical sacrifice did indeed typify the saving work of Christ, then Christ has somehow done (perfectly) what Levitical sacrifice did (imperfectly). The logic of atonement in Levitical sacrifice, if we can speak of such, is the logic of atonement in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This, I am convinced, is a Christian line of thought. But it is one that encounters an immediate problem. The problem is that any logic that might be present in Levitical sacrifice is far from obvious. Leviticus gives

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<sup>1</sup>Two quick notes are necessary. First, I use the phrase “Levitical sacrifice,” here and throughout, as a shorthand way of referring to the system of sacrifices and offerings prescribed for Israel in the Pentateuch. “Levitical offering” would perhaps serve better here since the sacrifices of Leviticus were actually particular kinds of offerings. But it seems more consistent with modern usage to use *sacrifice* instead of *offering* as a shorthand. Second, it must be recognized that my question concerns *Levitical* sacrifice, not religious sacrifice in general. Contrary to many anthropologists of the last two centuries or so, and in part because of their varied proposals, I am not confident that it is possible to explain the origin and meaning of all religious sacrifice. Even if such an explanation were possible, what I am interested in here is the testimony of Leviticus, not a generalized account of humanity’s religious practices. General theories of sacrifice are interesting and are relevant to my concerns in this study; though I believe this system was prescribed by God, it nevertheless shares something in common with the sacrificial practices of other peoples. However, the discontinuities between the sacrifices of Israel and surrounding nations were sharp, and were so by divine intention; to some degree, it seems God intended to correct their idolatrous sacrificial practices through the Levitical cult. Further, it is the text of Leviticus, not a scholarly reconstruction of the sources and development of ancient Israel’s cultic practices, that God has given the church as canonical. The rituals and assumptions of other cultures may be informative, then, but should not displace sustained attention to the text of Leviticus and its interpretation by the prophets of the OT and NT.

only the sparsest explanations as to the efficacy of its offerings; in fact, it is not always easy to discern what exactly happened in its rituals. And, however clear it all might have been to ancient Israel with their lived experience of sacrificial worship, much of the meaning of Levitical ritual is opaque to modern readers.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, then, making an effort to understand Christ through the cult appears naively idealistic; a nice thought, but impractical.

I admit the seriousness of the problem. However, Scripture offers us more interpretive help for Levitical sacrifice than we often realize. First, we do, at least, have the text of Leviticus itself. Even if details as to meaning are sparse, Leviticus nevertheless explains the sacrificial procedures to all the people; Moses was to speak the instructions of Leviticus to “the people of Israel” (Lev 1:2). Elsewhere in the ancient Near East, such knowledge was reserved for the priestly class alone. Leviticus, by contrast, was to be a “textbook for all Israel.”<sup>3</sup> The church is therefore invited to consider the inner workings of Levitical sacrifice and to search out its theology through this text.

Second, we do well to remember that Leviticus is not a standalone text but is presented to us as the continuation of the pentateuchal narrative. Levitical sacrifice, it has been suggested, was a means of “bodying forth” the story of Israel as told in the Pentateuch, a story of “creation, promise, redemption, and covenant.”<sup>4</sup> The narrative context of Leviticus, and the theological context that that narrative generates, should therefore serve as guides for interpreting Levitical ritual and be allowed to bring to the fore certain concepts that guide our attempt to discern a logic of atonement in the burnt offering.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>That Levitical rituals all might have been clear to ancient Israel is a commonly made claim. See, e.g., Gordon Wenham, “The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice,” in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 77.

<sup>3</sup>Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 3 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 144.

<sup>4</sup>Frank H. Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community: A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 5. By “bodying forth,” Gorman seems to mean something like reenacting. The ritual as a whole, with all its participants, objects, and movements, was a symbolic repetition of Israel’s history with YHWH.

<sup>5</sup>Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 7. I distinguish the narrative and theological context here. But in truth they are one and the same. The God of Israel, the God of the church, is a God who acts in history and is thereby known. The book of Exodus illustrates this point well, as God first reveals his name, YHWH, and then reveals the meaning of that name through all he does to deliver Israel and enter into covenant with it.

As I have stated, it is my conviction that the burnt offering “represented the core, and perhaps even the summation, of the entire sacrificial system.”<sup>6</sup> The burnt offering was the “fundamental sacrifice,” the offering that “encompasses the whole ritual movement in itself.”<sup>7</sup> It can therefore rightly be called “the paradigmatic offering in the Hebrew Bible,” the offering that “represents the purest form of divine service,” and “the main sacrifice of the Israelite cult.”<sup>8</sup> If this is so, then consideration of the narrative context of Leviticus is necessary for understanding this offering, an offering in which the story of Israel was ritually summarized.

In other words, if we are to understand the story of the burnt offering, we must understand its setting. Setting is simply “the background against which action takes place.” Setting is composed of time and place, of course, but also the occupations and habits of the characters along with their “general environment.”<sup>9</sup> Setting is therefore indispensable to understanding a story: as a word cannot be rightly understood outside its context, neither can an action or a sequence of actions that make up a story. This might be especially true of ritual action. Roy Gane emphasizes that ritual actions have no inherent meaning, demonstrating that the same action can have more than one meaning, depending on the context.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes this notion is used to distinguish the meaning of Israelite sacrifice from that of its Canaanite neighbors: even when Israel *did* the same thing as their neighbors at the altar,

<sup>6</sup>Michael L. Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 123.

<sup>7</sup>John Kleinig, *Leviticus* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 40; Michael L. Morales, “Atonement in Ancient Israel: The Whole Burnt Offering as Central to Israel’s Cult,” in *So Great a Salvation: A Dialogue on the Atonement in Hebrews*, ed. Jon C. Laansma, George H. Guthrie, and Cynthia Long Westfall, Library of New Testament Studies 516 (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 28.

<sup>8</sup>James W. Watts, “Olah: The Rhetoric of Burnt Offerings,” *Vetus Testamentum* 66, no. 1 (2006): 125, 132; John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 17.

<sup>9</sup>Hugh Holman and William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, 6th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 440.

<sup>10</sup>Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 4-6. Gane’s example: the sevenfold sprinkling of blood on the Day of Atonement, which serves to purge the inner sanctum of impurity and also to reconsecrate the outer altar. Purgation and consecration are related but distinct concepts. So, this action had related but distinct meanings, based on the context in which it occurred. Gane goes on to warn his readers against a kind of illegitimate totality transfer of ritual action; “the danger is interpretive leveling by importing meaning from one context to another.” Like words, it seems that ritual actions can have a given range of meaning depending on context.

it does not follow that they necessarily meant the same thing.<sup>11</sup> Setting, in short, is determinative of meaning.

If that is so, then much depends on understanding the setting of Levitical sacrifice. Chiefly, this means understanding its theology. This is so because, as just noted, the occupations and habits of characters is a major component of setting, and there is no more important character in Leviticus than God. But this is also so because of the preoccupation with theology inherent in all Levitical ritual. As Milgrom states, “Theology is what Leviticus is all about. It pervades every chapter and almost every verse. It is not expressed in pronouncements but embedded in rituals. Indeed, every act, whether movement, manipulation, or gesticulation, is pregnant with meaning.”<sup>12</sup> To understand Levitical ritual is to understand Levitical theology—and, to some extent, vice versa. To understand the burnt offering, then, we must understand something of the God who both prescribed and received this offering.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to set the background for my reading of the burnt offering in later chapters by attending to the narrative context of Leviticus. It seeks to do so through a commentary on Leviticus 1:1 that gives particular attention to the way this opening verse recalls the narrative of Genesis–Exodus. In the course of that commentary, I will begin to highlight concepts crucial to understanding Levitical sacrifice as a whole. Most importantly, however, I will call attention to the way this opening verse characterizes the God who speaks to Moses and summons Israel to himself. In doing so, I hope to establish the theological setting of the burnt offering in a way that will illumine my reading of the ritual and its testimony to the atoning work of Christ.

## LEVITICUS 1:1: A COMMENTARY

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מֵאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר

The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying . . .<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup>For examples of how the Israelite worldview affected the meaning of their sacrificial practices, and ruled out some potential meanings or ritual action, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 42–43.

<sup>12</sup>Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 42.

<sup>13</sup>Throughout, citations of the Hebrew text follow *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: With Werkgroep Informatica, Vrije Universiteit Morphology* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2006).

The opening sentence of Leviticus carries in its syllables the weight of a theological world. Two brief reflections reveal something of that weight.

First, it should not be overlooked that Leviticus opens with divine speech. This is no rare occurrence. Throughout the biblical narrative, the God of Israel shows himself to be a God who speaks. This certainly holds true for Leviticus, a book in which nearly every verse is a record of divine speech (Lev 8–10 being the main exception). The frequency of divine speech, however, does not diminish the weight of the divine voice. God’s speech reveals Godself. Through his word, including that of Leviticus, God addresses his covenant people from the depths of his love and holiness. This proposition in itself affects the way we read Leviticus and what we might see in its pages. “If the words here are the words of God who reveals his very self, then we are called through the words themselves into an encounter with God.”<sup>14</sup> A Christian reading of Leviticus therefore requires that we read with the “existential openness” and “full imaginative seriousness” of those who stand before God.<sup>15</sup>

Second, as mentioned above, the divine speech at the beginning of Leviticus puts the book in a narrative context; Leviticus continues a conversation that has already begun. Leviticus is not simply and purely law; rather, it is “law within a narrative context.”<sup>16</sup> And that narrative is theologically loaded. In the narrative context of Leviticus, the book of Exodus in particular, we are constantly confronted with the identity, character, and purposes of the one who reveals himself as God Almighty. Here we meet the holiness, justice, and compassion of Israel’s God; here we are confronted with claims of this God’s absolute and universal supremacy. And here we are called to consider what it is that this God intends to do with the world and with us.

Most immediately, Leviticus 1:1 directs us back to Exodus 40:34–38, where the LORD is said to fill the newly erected tabernacle with the glory

<sup>14</sup>Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 35.

<sup>15</sup>These concepts come from R. W. L. Moberly, *The God of the Old Testament: Encountering the Divine in Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 5–10. Importantly, Moberly notes that such a reading requires a close reading of the text and a second naiveté that “must be located downwind of the insights of modern learning.”

<sup>16</sup>Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 7.

of his presence.<sup>17</sup> Here God comes to dwell among his people so that he might be with them as their God (Ex 29:45). But as we will see, God's filling of the tent is not an unexpected event; it is rather the fitting end of the exodus. By recalling this event, Leviticus thus shows itself to be the sequel of Exodus and invites us to read its divine utterances as a continuation of the exodus narrative, which itself continues the story of creation and election found in Genesis.<sup>18</sup>

Reading with “imaginative seriousness,” we might now ask ourselves: What does this God have to say to us?

### וַיִּקְרָא—“AND HE CALLED”

Leviticus begins with the Hebrew word וַיִּקְרָא, commonly translated “and he called.” Here the divine voice calls out, seeking a response.

Commentators have sometimes made much of the character of this call. Mark Elliot notes a tendency in Jewish exegetes to hear in it a note of affection.<sup>19</sup> Thus Jonathan Sacks, following the medieval rabbi Rashi: “*Vayikra* is a call uttered in love”; “it is the language of invitation, friendship, love.”<sup>20</sup> Such a reading seems justified since it fits with what is undeniably one purpose for the tabernacle—YHWH's loving presence among his people. In the tabernacle, the LORD will dwell among the people of Israel and be their

<sup>17</sup>Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 134. It seems appropriate to me to use both the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) and the honorific “the LORD” when referring to the divine name given to Israel in Exodus. YHWH reminds us that the God of Israel is not a generic deity. He has particular attributes and a particular history that might cut against our assumptions about who God should be and what he should do. “The LORD,” on the other hand, is appropriate for the Christian claim that YHWH, God of Israel, is no tribal deity of an ancient people in whom we might be interested for purely historical reasons. He is rather the living God, worthy of all reverence and obedience and trust, who presents his grace to us in Jesus Christ and calls for our response. Use of “the LORD” also respects the Jewish tradition of referring to the divine name by a reverential substitute, a tradition Jesus himself seems to have followed. See Richard Bauckham, *Who Is God? Key Moments of Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 49–55.

<sup>18</sup>Wenham, *Leviticus*, 49; Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 5; Jay Sklar, *Leviticus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 27; Philip Peter Jensen, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 106 (repr., London: T&T Clark, 2021), 211. Interestingly, Jensen argues for reading Leviticus as part of a continuous narrative that runs all the way from Genesis to Kings.

<sup>19</sup>Mark W. Elliot, *Engaging Leviticus: Reading Leviticus Theologically with Its Past Interpreters* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 2. Cf. Radner, *Leviticus*, 39.

<sup>20</sup>Jonathan Sacks, *Leviticus: The Book of Holiness*, Covenant and Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books and the Orthodox Union, 2015), 61, 16.

God. Indeed, for just this reason, the LORD delivered Israel from Egypt (Ex 29:45-46). In this house, YHWH will meet with Israel; to this house, Israel will come to “gaze upon the beauty of the LORD” (Ps 27:4) and rejoice in his goodness (Ps 43:3-4), to worship the LORD and be blessed by him (Ps 132; cf. 1 Sam 1). The joy and blessing of YHWH’s presence mark the remainder of Leviticus 1, as the LORD holds out the promise of atonement, acceptance, and divine joy to those who approach the altar (Lev 1:3-9). In his call to Moses, the LORD invites Israel to enter into the joy of their Master.

As much as this call is an invitation uttered in love, however, it is also a summons uttered with divine authority.<sup>21</sup> In YHWH’s call to Moses, there rings a note of “solemnity,” emphasizing the weight of the forthcoming revelation.<sup>22</sup> Such solemnity fits the context of YHWH’s glory descending on and filling the tent. Sklar notes that God’s call to Moses from the tent, with subsequent deliverance of law, continues a pattern begun in Exodus: God descends (on Sinai in Exodus, here into the tent), God calls to Moses (Heb. אָל־מֹשֶׁה), then God issues his law through Moses (see Ex 19:20; 24:16).<sup>23</sup> When the pattern is repeated in the opening of Leviticus, it sets a distinctive tone, reminding us of the absolute authority and supremacy of the God who calls to Moses.

The LORD’s call therefore elicits a holy fear—a mix of gratitude, awe, and obedience. This holy fear becomes the affective ideal for Levitical sacrifice. At the altar, appearing before their King, Israel was to “serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling” (Ps 2:11). Such a response would serve well to reflect the nature of Israel’s relationship to God: it is a divinely initiated covenant, in which they are bound by both law and love to the God who has made them his own. We are reminded of that covenant as we keep reading.

### אֶל־מֹשֶׁה — “TO MOSES”

Not to be overlooked is that YHWH issues the call of Leviticus 1:1 אֶל־מֹשֶׁה, “to Moses.” This, too, reminds us of the weight of the divine encounter. At

<sup>21</sup>“And he summoned” is a common translation of אָל־מֹשֶׁה in Lev 1:1; see, e.g., Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 133.

<sup>22</sup>Wenham, *Leviticus*, 49.

<sup>23</sup>Sklar, *Leviticus*, 86.

Sinai, Israel speaks to Moses and says, “Why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die. . . . Go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say, and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you” (Deut 5:25, 27). The LORD’s presence, the people realize, is dangerous, and they ask Moses to intercede.

**Moses’ mediation.** That Israel would ask Moses to intercede is unsurprising. Moses is at this point the leader of Israel in every sense—political, military, and religious. In Exodus, he has been introduced as the prophet of YHWH and deliverer of Israel. Through Moses, God freed Israel from the tyranny of Pharaoh and the false gods of Egypt. Through Moses, God has led Israel through the wilderness, providing them with “bread from heaven” (Ex 16:4) and water from the rock (Ex 17:6), and giving them victory over Amalek (Ex 17:8-13). And, most remarkably of all, through Moses, the LORD has now descended to meet with Israel at Mount Sinai and established his covenant with them.

God’s summons to Moses from the tabernacle can therefore be seen as the culmination (at this point) of his history with Israel. It represents the purpose of the exodus and the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. As Frank Gorman states,

The Exodus from Egypt took place in order that Yahweh might dwell in the midst of the people of Israel (cf. Exod. 6:2-8). The tabernacle is an expression of the future God anticipates in redeeming Israel from the slavery and oppression of Egypt. This text also recalls the promise made to the ancestor (Gen. 17:8: “I will be their God”). Thus, the tabernacle is a partial but concrete actualization of the ancestral promise, and as the divine dwelling place it is a manifestation of the promise actualized and redemption realized.<sup>24</sup>

The descent of God’s glory to the tent of meeting thus contains the whole of his dealings with Israel to this point. As Israel approaches him there, God’s redemptive acts are not only remembered but participated in. At the altar, Israel will enjoy the fruit of their election and redemption.

**The Mosaic covenant.** To recall Moses’ role as mediator, of course, is to recall the covenant that typically bears his name. Of all the events narrated

<sup>24</sup>Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 12.

in Exodus, it is probably the solemnization of the Mosaic covenant, recounted in Exodus 19–24, that is most prominent in the setting of Leviticus. In fact, this covenant might be seen as the very purpose of everything that happened at the tabernacle. Directly after the solemnization of the covenant, God commands a sanctuary be built so that he might dwell among Israel (Ex 25:1-9). The implication seems to be that this sanctuary, known as the tent of meeting or tabernacle, will perpetuate the experience of that covenant ceremony.<sup>25</sup> Reflection on that ceremony therefore sheds light on what it was that YHWH was calling Israel to at the tabernacle.

When YHWH leads Israel to Mount Sinai after the exodus (Ex 19:1-2), he makes his covenant proposal through Moses.<sup>26</sup> “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians,” he reminds Israel, “and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:4-6). YHWH, who has already shown great love and faithfulness toward Israel in redeeming them from Egypt, now calls Israel into a more formalized covenant relationship. Israel will be YHWH’s beloved people—his “treasured possession”—as they have been since the call of Abram (Gen 12:1-3). Now, however, Israel will exist not only as a family but as a nation. No longer will they be formally defined by descent from Abraham alone but by the law of YHWH their king and the land he will give them.<sup>27</sup>

Israel accepts YHWH’s covenant proposal with a pledge of obedience: “All that the LORD has spoken we will do” (Ex 19:8). It is then, after Israel’s pledge, that YHWH comes to dwell in their midst on Sinai “in a thick cloud” (Ex 19:9). From the fire and cloud on Sinai, YHWH declares the terms of the covenant to Israel—the law, with its moral, ceremonial, and civil aspects (Ex 20:1–23:19)—and promises to give them the land of Canaan, where he will bless and protect them (Ex 23:20-33).

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<sup>25</sup>Morales, *Who Shall Ascend*, 96.

<sup>26</sup>Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 227.

<sup>27</sup>William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (repr., Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 99.

After Moses repeats to the people the commandments of YHWH, and after they again pledge their obedience (Ex 24:3), the newly established covenant is celebrated in breathtaking fashion. Moses writes down the words of YHWH, builds an altar at the foot of the mountain, and commands that burnt and peace offerings be offered to YHWH. Moses then reads the words of YHWH, and the people respond yet again with a pledge of obedience, this time more emphatically: “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Ex 24:7). Following this final pledge, Moses throws the blood of the slain offerings onto the people, declaring it “the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Ex 24:8). Then, most remarkably of all, God shows himself to Israel and communes with them on the mountain. After Moses throws the blood of the covenant onto the people, “Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. . . . And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; *they beheld God, and ate and drank*” (Ex 24:9-11).

The whole of this covenant ceremony informs our understanding of Levitical sacrifice, and there are at least three important conclusions that may be drawn from it, which I will note here and further develop below. First, that the tabernacle was meant to perpetuate this event suggests that, as Gorman states, Levitical ritual was “a means of enacting the covenant relationship.”<sup>28</sup> The promise of the covenant—that God will be Israel’s God, that they will be his people—was to be realized in the Levitical cult. By their offerings, Israel was to acknowledge God’s covenant lordship, his electing and redeeming grace, and respond to it with their own pledge of covenant loyalty.

Second, while the meaning of Levitical sacrifice cannot be reduced to a legal transaction (as I will argue below), the setting of Levitical sacrifice was nevertheless charged with concern for God’s law. The law of God was a fundamental concern at the altar. This concern was concretized by the fact that, as Israel approached God in the tabernacle, they stood before this law as summarized in the Ten “Words” or Commandments. Waltke notes that the Ten Words of the covenant were placed in the ark of the covenant, the

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<sup>28</sup>Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 5.

symbolic throne of YHWH on which he resided in the holy of holies. The LORD's personal presence in the tent was therefore tied to his law. In fact, we can think of this law as "an expression of God himself. The [commandments] are part of God's identity, a central part of God's self-revelation."<sup>29</sup> To draw near to this God in sacrifice therefore required walking in the way of righteousness prescribed by the law given at Sinai.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, in the covenant ceremony on Mount Sinai, we get a glimpse of the telos of Levitical sacrifice: holy communion with God, even beatific vision. The most remarkable scene in Exodus's account of the covenant ceremony is the ascent of Moses, Aaron, and the elders up the mountain, where they eat and drink with God and see his glory. To this point in Exodus, the danger of God's presence on the mountain has been emphasized. As his glory dwells in the cloud on the mountain, YHWH repeatedly warns Moses to allow no one to come near the mountain. Israel was not allowed to touch the mountain, nor to "break through to the LORD to look" (Ex 19:21). The promised consequences are severe: the LORD will "break out against them" (Ex 19:24). Now, however, after the application of sacrificial blood, Israel is able to draw near to God, to dwell in his presence and even "behold" (Heb. הִתְבַּרֵּךְ) him.<sup>30</sup> The sacrifice at Mount Sinai grants access to God's glory and presence and even what seems to be a prefiguration of the beatific vision. Where such a vision would previously have been fatal, it was graciously granted to Israel after the application of sacrificial blood.

If the tabernacle really was an extension of the Sinai experience, then we might expect the Levitical offerings to share a similar telos. And that in fact is just what we find in Leviticus 9, the text that tells of the inauguration of the Levitical cult and that likely depicts the usual procedural order of Levitical offerings.<sup>31</sup> There we read that sacrificial worship culminated in the peace offering, an offering that consisted of a shared meal between the LORD, his priests, and the offeror. Once the first peace offering was presented and

<sup>29</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 413.

<sup>30</sup>It is helpful to note the way in which Moses' act of throwing blood on the people anticipates the priests' later throwing of blood at the tabernacle. Most often, that blood will be thrown on the altar of burnt offering, not people. Still, there seems to be a clear parallel: in each case, the throwing of blood, whether on persons or objects, purifies (or sanctifies).

<sup>31</sup>A. F. Rainey, "The Order of Sacrifices in Old Testament Ritual Texts," *Biblica* 51, no. 4 (1970): 497.

the Levitical order of worship completed for the first time, the people were granted the vision of God: “The glory of the LORD appeared to all the people” (Lev 9:23). As the fire of the LORD came out from the tent to consume the offerings, the people responded by shouting (either for joy or fear) and falling on their faces (Lev 9:24).<sup>32</sup> The divine fire confirmed that YHWH was indeed dwelling in the midst of Israel and receiving their worship.<sup>33</sup> But it also revealed the telos of Levitical sacrifice: the vision of God. Just as it was at Sinai, so it was in the tabernacle: the sacrifices of the Mosaic covenant led to the vision of God and communion with him in a shared meal.

That Levitical sacrifice held out the promise of the vision of God and a secure dwelling in his glory will be important to my reading of the burnt offering. For now, however, there is more to say about the theological context of Levitical sacrifice, in particular about the identity of the God whom Israel beholds and to whom they draw near in the tabernacle.

### יְהוָה—“YHWH”

As we continue reading, Leviticus 1:1 makes explicit the identity of the one calling to Moses from the tent: יְהוָה (“YHWH”). This is the God who blessed the patriarchs, spoke to Moses, and delivered Israel out of Egypt. Here again, we are pointed back to the exodus narrative, especially as it bears on the identity of Israel’s God.

***The revelation of the Name.*** Of prime importance in the exodus narrative (and the entire canon) is the revelation of the name יְהוָה in Exodus 3. As Moses is tending his father-in-law’s sheep, he comes to “the mountain of God,” where the angel of the LORD appears to him “in a flame of fire” (Ex 3:1-2). This fire indwells a thornbush, and though the bush seems to burn, it is not consumed. When Moses, fascinated by “this great sight,” turns aside to observe it more thoroughly, God calls to him, commanding him “take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:3-5). As the LORD identifies himself as “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” Moses

<sup>32</sup>Sklar, *Leviticus*, 154.

<sup>33</sup>Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 63. “The fire is divine fire in which the LORD reveals his glory.” Robert D. Macina, *The Lord’s Service: A Ritual Analysis of the Order, Function, and Purpose of the Daily Divine Service in the Pentateuch* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), 82.

hides his face, “for he was afraid to look at God” (Ex 3:6). As Moses stands before the flame, simultaneously frightened and allured, the LORD announces his intention to deliver Israel from their oppression under Pharaoh and to do so through Moses’ agency.<sup>34</sup> Moses hesitates, expressing doubt as to his own fitness as well as his ignorance of this God’s name.<sup>35</sup> The LORD then responds to Moses:

“I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” (Ex 3:14-15)

In this name, the LORD reveals something of his character. According to the customs of the ancient Near East, “the meaning of an object’s name indicates its nature and determines its characteristics.”<sup>36</sup> In Scripture, a name often “expresses a person’s essence and identity and the meaning of this person’s life.” Since the God of Israel has a name, “he is not an anonymous force.”<sup>37</sup> The Name that God gave Moses in the burning bush thus revealed who he was in himself—his nature or essence.<sup>38</sup> It also revealed something of who he would be *for Israel*. This name “expressed the nature and operations of God, and [assured Israel] that God would manifest in deeds the nature expressed in his name.”<sup>39</sup> It therefore denoted his “enacted identity, God’s sheer, irreducible particularity of *this* One who is and acts *thus*.”<sup>40</sup> The name יהוה?

<sup>34</sup>Moberly, *God of the Old Testament*, 56.

<sup>35</sup>It is unclear whether Moses was confessing his ignorance of the Name itself or of the meaning of the Name. Dumbrell notes that the Name is found around 116 times in between Gen 12:1 and Ex 3:12, with 40 times coming from the lips of the patriarchs (*Covenant and Creation*, 83). It is possible, Dumbrell admits, that these occurrences of the Name are all anachronisms (many take this view, including Moberly, *God of the Old Testament*, 67). It has also been proposed that while Israel previously knew the Name, Moses, who grew up in the courts of Egypt, did not (67). Dumbrell chooses to follow J. A. Motyer in holding that while the Name was known to the patriarchs, “it is now in the Exodus period that the significance of the name Yahweh is communicated” (*Covenant and Creation*, 83).

<sup>36</sup>Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 37.

<sup>37</sup>*The Catechism of the Catholic Church, with Modifications from the Editio Typica* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 203.

<sup>38</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, book 1, *God*, trans. Anston C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 1.22.10.

<sup>39</sup>C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, *The Pentateuch* (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), 287.

<sup>40</sup>John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 36.

“summarizes a history,” a history that is grounded in God’s eternal attributes and was still unfolding as he called to Moses from the burning bush.<sup>41</sup>

It is this name that Israel remembered at the altar and this name that was said to dwell in the tent (Deut 12:11-12). Calling on this name in the tabernacle, Israel would remember the divine attributes and mighty acts attached to the name YHWH. Surely the identity of YHWH, then, has something to say about the meaning of the burnt offering.

Yet, what exactly does this name reveal? Who is the God who calls out to Moses from the tent of meeting? Given the way the presence and character of יהוה dominate the setting of Leviticus, it is appropriate to reflect on the Name at length.

***The meaning of the Name: Mystery.*** As much as anything else, the name יהוה speaks to the mysterious nature of the God of Israel. “This divine name is mysterious just as God is mysterious. It is at once a name revealed and something like the refusal of a name, and hence it better expresses God as what he is—infinately above everything that we can understand or say.”<sup>42</sup> The mystery of God is evident both in the name יהוה and in the way that name was revealed to Moses.

Commenting on the giving of the Name in Exodus 3, R. W. L. Moberly calls attention to the uniqueness of the fire that symbolizes the divine presence. Here and elsewhere (notably Ex 19), Moberly notes, the fire that symbolizes God’s presence blazes yet does not consume. To say the least, this is unusual. The divine fire of Mount Sinai is “intrinsically unlike regular fire,” a point that speaks to the unique and mysterious nature of the God who appears in the flame. Fire itself, Moberly states, is “symbolically suggestive” of a reality that simultaneously attracts and repels, and that “by its nature cannot be grasped or readily controlled by humans.”<sup>43</sup> How much more a fire that burns without consuming? The imagery of the burning bush points to something beyond human comprehension and control.

<sup>41</sup>As Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), says beautifully, the name YHWH refers to “a very specific, named and biographed God” (54). “Summarizes a history” is the language of Peter J. Leithart, *The Ten Commandments: A Guide to the Perfect Law of Liberty* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 46.

<sup>42</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 206.

<sup>43</sup>Moberly, *God of the Old Testament*, 55-56.

The mystery symbolized in the burning bush is likewise present in the Name itself. The translation of the longer form of the Name (Heb. אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה) is notoriously difficult. The verbal form is imperfect and could therefore be taken as either continuous present or future. Context usually forces the decision one way or the other, but not in this case. So, in addition to the usual English rendering “I am who I am,” another possible translation is “I will be who I will be,” and it is probably not possible to choose between these alternatives on the basis of the verbal form alone.<sup>44</sup> This difficulty in itself makes the Name somewhat elusive.<sup>45</sup>

Whichever translation one prefers, however, this construction remains odd as a name. The Name is doubtless significant—the text’s repetition of the Name and the way it attaches the Name to God’s solemn promises of deliverance make that clear. But the nature of its significance is not immediately obvious. Classical commentators, sensitive to the Name’s play with the verb “to be,” were inclined to see the Name as a metaphysical statement, identifying God as most real and true Being. The Name, on this reading, identifies Israel’s God as the one who possesses being in and of himself, not derivatively, and who is the ground of existence for all else. Thus Origen: “All things that exist derive their share of being from him who truly exists, who said through Moses, ‘I am that I am.’”<sup>46</sup> Contemporary exegetes, on the other hand, tend to see this name not as a metaphysical statement but as a pledge; the Name means, above all, that God will show himself and prove his faithfulness by his future grace toward Israel. “I AM WHO I AM” therefore has the force of “I will be with you” or “I am who I am for you.”<sup>47</sup> It is meant to denote consistency and dependability, not the “Being” of classical metaphysics.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Moberly, *God of the Old Testament*, 71.

<sup>45</sup>Many commentators, on this basis, see the Name as the refusal of a name. By providing Moses with the name “I am who I am,” God was refusing to be labeled and therefore controlled by Israel. For example, Bauckham, *Who Is God?*, 41.

<sup>46</sup>Origen, *On First Principles* 1.3.6; as quoted in Joseph T. Lienhard, ed., *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Old Testament 3 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001). For another classic example of this kind of reading, see Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, ed. and trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Classics of Western Christianity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1978), 60 (2.23).

<sup>47</sup>Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 366.

<sup>48</sup>R. Allen Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), briefly and admirably lays out these alternatives (26).

Certainly, the modern trend to take the Name as a statement about YHWH's forthcoming faithfulness to Israel is warranted and makes for edifying reading. The LORD did indeed enact this name through his redemptive works on Israel's behalf, thereby proving his faithfulness, justice, and sovereignty in his triumph over Pharaoh. In this way, the Name promised God's "loving faithfulness" to Israel, about which I will say more below.<sup>49</sup> However, even if a metaphysical reading such as Origen's does not capture everything there is to say about the Name, the construction "I AM WHO I AM" nevertheless seems to point to YHWH's "ontological incomparability." Michael Allen remarks on what is perhaps the most peculiar feature of this name, its lack of "referential matrix." When God identifies himself in Exodus 3:14, he does so without reference to any other reality. The name God reveals to Moses is "self-reflexive" and should be understood, at minimum, as a statement on divine uniqueness.<sup>50</sup> The God manifest in the burning bush, who later dwells in the tabernacle, cannot be classified with any other reality, even in the broadest terms, but is ontologically unique.<sup>51</sup> Even in his self-revelation, then, he remains mysterious, beyond our grasp, as he is beyond comparison.

***The meaning of the Name: Aseity.*** The ontological uniqueness denoted by the Name appears also to entail God's aseity, or self-existence. Whatever else the self-reflexive name "I AM WHO I AM" might mean, it undoubtedly suggests YHWH's absolute independence. This God, defined by nothing besides himself, is therefore determined by nothing else and dependent on nothing else. Rather, he possesses his life and being in and of himself. The Septuagint famously translated YHWH as ὁ ὢν, "the One who is," a rendering that scholars today tend to see as "less a translation than an interpretation."<sup>52</sup> But even if that is the case, it does not necessarily mean that the Septuagint misleads us. The God who appears in the fire on Sinai is exquisitely alive, a flame that burns without dependence on fuel. In his

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<sup>49</sup>Bauckham, *Who Is God?*, 43.

<sup>50</sup>"The Bible's primary way of signaling God's uniqueness is by way of God's proper name, YHWH." Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction*, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 29.

<sup>51</sup>Michael Allen, *Sanctification*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 57.

<sup>52</sup>Moberly, *God of the Old Testament*, 82.

everlasting vitality, YHWH is truly the One “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev 1:4).

Even if the Name in its context of origin did not entail all that classical Greek philosophy meant by “Being” and participation, that does not mean the text does not lend itself to such a reading. Hilary of Poitiers famously saw in the name YHWH the pure, supreme existence standing behind all things that his philosophical pursuits had led him to believe necessary for making sense of the world.<sup>53</sup> Moberly notes that while Hilary’s reading may go beyond what was envisaged in the text’s context of origin, it is not for that reason an illegitimate interpretation. Given the Christian recontextualization of the text, and the intellectual context in which Hilary was reading it, we can fairly judge that Hilary saw “some genuinely possible implications of Exodus 3 in its depiction of God’s self-revelation to Moses as the God who can be known yet is beyond knowledge, as the living God who can cause Hilary to be alive.”<sup>54</sup> The revelation of the divine name in Exodus 3 invites the kind of metaphysical reading Hilary (and so many other classical exegetes with him) gave it.

The exodus narrative reveals a God who is preeminently *alive*. This God is eternal, active, alert, and incomparably mighty. YHWH hears the cries of his oppressed people, remembers his ancient covenant, and acts in the vitality of his immeasurable strength—showing himself at every point to be the living God, in contrast to the deities of Egypt. At no point is he dependent or limited, at no point is the exercise of either his mercy or his might constrained by anything outside himself. On him, rather, all things depend, and by him are all things constrained. This God possesses life in himself and possesses it to a degree unmatched by any living thing. He alone is YHWH, the one who most truly *is*.

***The meaning of the Name: Incomparability and sovereignty.*** The rest of the Pentateuch likewise insists that YHWH alone is God—unmatched, inimitable, incomparable. In the “priestly” voice of the creation account of Genesis 1, for example, YHWH is exalted as supreme: he alone is Creator, making all things from nothing, unrivaled, and without dependence on any coeternal principle. As the sole Creator of heaven and earth, alone eternal,

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<sup>53</sup>Hilary, *On the Trinity* 1.5.

<sup>54</sup>Moberly, *God of the Old Testament*, 86.

YHWH is set apart from all other reality. He cannot be classed or categorized alongside his creatures but is set apart from all else by an “infinite qualitative distinction.”<sup>55</sup> This God is singular, incomparable, Wholly Other. While not unknown to his people, he remains incomprehensible.

In Exodus, too, God’s incomparability is emphasized. For example, when YHWH plagues Egypt with frogs, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and asks them to plead with YHWH to take the frogs away. Moses agrees to do so but asks Pharaoh to specify a time for the frogs to be removed. His reasoning: when Pharaoh sees the frogs die out on the day he requested, he will know “that there is no one like the LORD our God” (Ex 8:10). In the plagues, the LORD was not only making war on Egypt but showing Israel and Egypt alike he had no rivals; there was none like YHWH.

This much seems also to be entailed by the divine name. In all the plagues, and in his great act of delivering Israel from Egypt, God will act so that “the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD” (Ex 7:5). The implication of this statement is that the name YHWH is not wholly incomprehensible to the Egyptians. When they learn that Israel’s God is YHWH, they will learn his absolute sovereignty—that he alone is the God who accomplishes all his will and that there is no other. The name YHWH, it seems to be assumed, clearly enough denotes that singular sovereignty.

As the God who perfectly possesses life and gives life as he will, the one who accomplishes all his holy will as he sees fit, the God of Israel is unique. Thus, as noted above, he is not definable by reference to any other reality. He might be *imaged* by created reality—he manifests himself in fire; he plays the role of warrior (Ex 15:3); he is “Most High” and “Almighty”; he is a rock in the wilderness. These analogies, however, should be read with a recognition that whatever likeness these realities may have to God, there is always a greater unlikeness.<sup>56</sup> The self-reflexive name of God, as Allen puts it, reminds us that even when God reveals himself, he remains Wholly Other.

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<sup>55</sup>As Thomas Aquinas argues, in *Summa Theologica* 1.3.5, God, as the principle of all being, is without genus.

<sup>56</sup>As it is said in the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, canon 2: “Between the Creator and the creature there cannot be a likeness so great that the unlikeness is not greater.” H. J. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1937), 236-96, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/latran4.asp>.

By his gracious self-disclosure, we know God in truth; yet we always know him as Holy, Incomparable Mystery.

**The meaning of the Name: Holiness.** Closely related to the mystery, aseity, and sovereignty of God is his holiness. In the LORD's self-manifestation through the fire for the burning bush, this holiness is revealed. As Moses approaches the blaze—an approach that informs Israel's approach at the altar—the LORD warns Moses, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). Richard Bauckham notes how striking the occurrence of the word *holy* is here. “If one were reading through the Bible from the beginning, this is the first time [since Gen 2:3] one would encounter the word ‘holy.’”<sup>57</sup> Given how often *holy* and *holiness* appear in the rest of the Pentateuch, this is remarkable. God's holiness, it seems, is tightly bound up with the name יהוה.

**Moral and majestic holiness.** The concept of divine holiness, central to the drama of Exodus and Leviticus, is rich and difficult. It has sometimes been defined as moral purity, the absolute righteousness of God's will and ways.<sup>58</sup> This could even be considered a “classical” definition of divine holiness.<sup>59</sup> In much Christian theology, God's holiness has been considered “a general term for the moral excellency of God.”<sup>60</sup> It has been considered synonymous with his righteousness, his “incorruptible rectitude and justice.”<sup>61</sup>

Certainly, moral excellence is one aspect of God's holiness, one that elicits our worship: “Infinite purity, even more than infinite knowledge or infinite power, is the object of reverence.”<sup>62</sup> To reduce God's holiness to moral purity, however, does not fully account for the witness of Scripture, a point that has been widely argued in the past century or more.<sup>63</sup> In Scripture, God's

<sup>57</sup>Bauckham, *Who Is God?*, 37. Genesis 2:3, rendered in English, reads, “So God blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” *Holy* appears here in a verbal form, however, so perhaps Bauckham can be taken as correct if the search is restricted to nominal and adjectival forms, as his statement might be read.

<sup>58</sup>Bavinck notes the tendency to associate holiness with moral perfection and purity in the early Reformed theologians. See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 216.

<sup>59</sup>Allen, *Sanctification*, 47.

<sup>60</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 413.

<sup>61</sup>Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, *First Through Tenth Topics*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 235 (3.19.1).

<sup>62</sup>Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:413.

<sup>63</sup>Bavinck could state, “At present everyone acknowledges that the concept of holiness in the Old and New Testaments expresses a relation of God to the world,” not just his moral purity. Herman

holiness marks all he is and does.<sup>64</sup> It refers not only to his negative relation to sin—he is both free from any stain of injustice and rightly opposed to all evil—but also to all his relations to his creatures, and even the quality of his own self-contained life. “Talk of God’s holiness,” says John Webster, “denotes the majesty and singular purity which the triune God is in himself and with which he acts towards and in the lives of his creatures.”<sup>65</sup> Holiness speaks of the moral perfection of God, to be sure, but does so as this perfection is enfolded into the totality of God’s majesty.

Holiness is not simply one divine attribute among many but the brilliant perfection of the LORD’s unbounded goodness, simple in nature yet varied in effects.<sup>66</sup> “YHWH is not called holy because of an immediately conspicuous attribute. He is rather called holy in a comprehensive sense, in connection with every revelation that impresses us with his deity.”<sup>67</sup> Holiness, we might say, is that which “consummates and harmonizes all other divine characteristics.” Better, “Holiness points especially to the undivided glory of God in all God’s diversely good qualities.”<sup>68</sup> God’s holiness is thus his uniqueness; we may again refer to his “ontological incomparability.”<sup>69</sup> “Holiness just is the Mystery, the Immanence and Sovereign Aseity of God; It is the Hidden and Infinite Majesty of the One Lord.”<sup>70</sup> In this sense, God’s holiness is his singular “capacity and right to arouse our reverent awe and wonder.”<sup>71</sup>

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Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 216. Allen, writing in recent years, makes a similar observation—it is rare today to find a theologian who treats holiness exclusively as a moral attribute (*Sanctification*, 51).

<sup>64</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 266: “[Holiness] is not really an attribute to be coordinated with the other divine attributes distinguished in the divine nature. It is something coextensive with and applicable to everything that can be predicated of God: He is holy in everything that characterizes Him and reveals Him, holy in goodness and grace, no less than in His righteousness and wrath.”

<sup>65</sup>Webster, *Holiness*, 41.

<sup>66</sup>For brilliance as an image for God’s holiness, see Allan Coppedge, *Portraits of God: A Biblical Theology of Holiness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), chap. 5.

<sup>67</sup>Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:220.

<sup>68</sup>Thomas C. Oden, *Classical Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 64.

<sup>69</sup>John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, vol. 2 of *A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 28; Allen, *Sanctification*, 68.

<sup>70</sup>Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: Processions and Persons* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020), 27.

<sup>71</sup>Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 28. I do not mean to imply that holiness is attributed to God only insofar as he is related to his creatures; he is holy eternally, apart from creation, in and of himself. Yet

It may be best, then, to define divine holiness simply as that which distinguishes God as God. In a sense, each divine attribute attests God's uniqueness. God is simple; there is no distinction between his essence and existence or attributes. Each attribute of God "designates the totality of the being of God under some particular aspect," so each divine attribute reveals God as unique.<sup>72</sup> Yet holiness is the name we give that majestic uniqueness. When YHWH reveals himself as "majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders," he prompts the rhetorical question, "Who is like you, O LORD?" (Ex 15:11).

*Triune holiness.* On a Christian reading of Leviticus—one convinced that the God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament, the God who is eternally and unchangeably Father, Son, and Spirit—we can say that the holiness revealed in the fiery theophany is the holiness of Father, Son, and Spirit. "God is holy in his triune being and activity." This, according to John Webster, determines what Christian theology can and must say about God's holiness. The triune nature of God's holiness (along with the history of the enactment of his holy name) makes his holiness something concrete and particular. "God is not simply holy mystery, the nameless and voiceless whence of some sense of the numinous, and ineffable and indefinite deity."<sup>73</sup> Rather, God's holiness is structured by his triune being.

Recently, motivated in part by concerns similar to Webster's, Katherine Sonderegger has argued that "holiness is the conceptual name for the Triune Mystery." "Trinity," conversely, "is the conceptual unfolding of the Superabundant Holiness of God."<sup>74</sup> Interestingly, Sonderegger argues this claim by reflecting on the holy fire of Exodus and Leviticus, an image she believes corresponds to the mystery of the divine procession.<sup>75</sup> "Here we are shown in the sacrificial cultus a perfectly general property of the Holy One: He is altogether Fire, and His Life is an Exceeding Weight of Glory whose Inner Core is Molten Flame. Out of this Luminous Cloud, His Combustion pours forth." In this "combustion," she explains, we see an image of the *exitus et*

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that eternal holiness is recognized in large part by the impression of awe it leaves on God's creatures.

<sup>72</sup>Webster, *Holiness*, 37.

<sup>73</sup>Webster, *Holiness*, 32, 36.

<sup>74</sup>Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 2:84, 27.

<sup>75</sup>Importantly for Sonderegger, this procession is one.

*reditus* of God's inner life.<sup>76</sup> Sonderegger notes that the "doctors of the church spoke eagerly of Divine Fire when they considered the Holy Processions. Nicaea itself sums up the Divine Life: God from God, Light from Light." She notes also Rowan Williams's appeal to "the fittingness of fire as idiom for Trinitarian development: the flame passed from torch to torch, say, can extend itself without division or diminution; the second flame is fully fire yet distinctly its own light and heat."<sup>77</sup> She thus speaks of "the Procession, the Divine Fire that just is God in Act . . . the Fiery Descent of the Son, His Generation, which is Fire blazing forth from the Holy of Holies." Significantly for our present purposes, Sonderegger even goes so far as to say that the order of the divine life is one of sacrifice. The divine procession is self-offering and return, the descending flame of divine self-gift answered by ascending smoke. God is not just Molten Flame but "Molten Gift." All this, Sonderegger claims, is the way the priestly voice of the Pentateuch teaches the Trinity.<sup>78</sup>

Sonderegger happily admits that her reading of the text, like (as she judges) the doctrine or the Trinity itself, is "speculative." That is, it is a confident, dogmatic exegesis that closely attends to Scripture in order to search out "the principal truths of [Christian] doctrine; high truths and mysteries."<sup>79</sup> Some points of exegesis will not be persuasive to all, not even to those sympathetic to her approach to the text. Regardless of how one assesses her reading, however, she is making an important claim about divine holiness. Similar to Webster, Sonderegger argues that divine holiness is not the impression left on us by his raw, undifferentiated power. Nor does it merely denote the subjective effect of standing before sheer mystery, as Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the*

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<sup>76</sup>Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 2:434, 458.

<sup>77</sup>Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 2:434; referencing Williams's *Tokens of Trust* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 68-72.

<sup>78</sup>Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 2:452, 465, 27-33.

<sup>79</sup>Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 2:xxvii. The term *speculative* might raise suspicions in some of Sonderegger's readers. Some, too, will be concerned with the novelty of her reading—though she clearly has something of a precedent in the works of Hans Urs von Balthasar. But while some may believe there is little to justify Sonderegger's reading of the divine fire of Exodus-Leviticus as a witness to divine procession, it seems to me that this move cannot be wholly dismissed. The mystery and wonder of the divine fire in Exodus and Leviticus does indeed seem to correspond to the mystery and wonder of God's own inner life. On that basis, I believe that Sonderegger's effort at such a speculative reading is justified, even if the reading itself is more difficult to assess.

*Holy* might lead us to believe. Rather, God's holiness is something particular. It is an *order*, the trinitarian structure of God's "Infinite Boundedness." And as any order implies an ethic, so too does the order of God's inner life as Father, Son, and Spirit. The structure of God's inner life reveals "the Processional Life of God as *ethical*, as Goodness." "There is nothing in God," she insists, "in His Majestic Inwardness, that is not an expression of His Sublime Righteousness."<sup>80</sup> Even the holiness of God's triune life, and even when considered apart from his creatures, would therefore contain some notion of moral good, or at least a ground for such a notion.

Perhaps, then, even if God's holiness should not be reduced to his moral excellence, we can say that it never leaves behind the notion of moral excellence. Holiness is always more than righteousness but never less. In this way, God's holiness can be the principal of his judgment against sin, as Scripture seems to make it, without being made synonymous with righteousness.<sup>81</sup>

***The meaning of the Name: Steadfast love.*** Finally, we should draw attention to the way the name YHWH communicates God's steadfast love. In Exodus 5, having been commissioned by God to lead Israel out of Egypt, Moses announces God's will to Israel: "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness'" (Ex 5:1). Pharaoh responds in a way that sets the stage for further revelation of the Name through the plagues that will follow—"Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go" (Ex 5:2). Pharaoh's disregard for God is followed (as is so often the case) by brutality; he increases his demand on Israel by withholding the straw needed to make bricks. The people see they are in trouble, and they despair.

In Exodus 6:2-13, in response to Israel's discouragement, God provides something of his own commentary on the name he gave to Moses. God sends Moses to Israel with words that unfold the significance of his name.

I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am

<sup>80</sup>Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 2:85, 380, 347.

<sup>81</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:220.

the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD. (Ex 6:6-8)

The threefold repetition of “I am YHWH [i.e., the LORD]” in this passage is surrounded by pledges of God’s covenant love and faithfulness (on which he had made good by the time of Leviticus). According to his own testimony in these verses, the God of Israel will show himself to be “YHWH your God” when he redeems Israel from Egypt, takes them to be his own (i.e., makes a covenant with them at Sinai), and keeps the promise he made to their fathers to give them the land of Canaan. When YHWH fulfills his covenant promise, Israel will know the significance of his name.

The same notes of divine love and faithfulness were sounded earlier in Exodus 3. When God first speaks to Moses from the burning bush, he identifies himself by reference to his covenant beneficiaries; he is “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6). He then announces his remarkable compassion for Israel, whom he already regards as his beloved: “I have surely seen the affliction of *my people* who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. *I know their sufferings*, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land into a good and broad land. . . . The cry of the people of Israel has come to me” (Ex 3:7-9). When Moses tells the elders of Israel of YHWH’s appearance and intent to rescue them, he is similarly to announce YHWH as the God who has made promises to Israel’s fathers and who now promises himself again. Per God’s instruction, he is to gather the elders and tell them, “The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, ‘I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites . . . a land flowing with milk and honey’” (Ex 3:16-17). Here again, the revelation of the name YHWH is bound up with God’s promise, faithfulness, and mercy to Israel.

The name of YHWH therefore denotes, in addition to all that was said above, his “pragmatic presence”; YHWH is “I am who I am for you [Israel].”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 366.

The name YHWH indicates both something of the eternal, infinite being of God and the good news that this eternal and infinite God has given himself to Israel in covenant. As God explains the meaning of his name to Moses, he explains that he is “the absolute God of the fathers, acting with unfettered liberty.” The Name “precluded any comparison between the God of Israel and the deities of the Egyptians and other nations, and furnished Moses and his people with strong consolation in their affliction, and a powerful support to their confidence in the realization of His purposes of salvation made know to the fathers.”<sup>83</sup> YHWH, in short, is “he who makes good on his promises”—as the exodus narrative will prove and as Israel will gladly celebrate at the altar.<sup>84</sup> This God is both “he who is,” who is superlatively existent, and “he who is with his creatures in mercy and faithfulness.”<sup>85</sup>

***The Name and Levitical sacrifice.*** Given all that has been said about the character of the LORD and the meaning of his name, it seems appropriate to state here what all this means for our reading of Levitical sacrifice.

First, and most obviously, the God revealed in the narrative of Genesis and Exodus, identifying himself as YHWH, is not a God who is in need and can therefore be manipulated. YHWH is not a pagan god, dependent on the world and the service of his people. Instead, YHWH’s aseity means that, properly speaking, YHWH cannot be acted on by his creatures. As we saw above, the self-reflexive character of YHWH’s name indicates an absolute independence from all other reality. YHWH, the Creator and sustainer of all, is supremely existent, having all life in and of himself and deriving nothing from his creatures. And, as Thomas Weinandy argues, this strong Creator-creature distinction implied by the Name grounds a proper doctrine of divine impassibility. YHWH, Weinandy comments, always shows himself to be “wholly other than the created order,” even as he is constantly and lovingly active in the created order.<sup>86</sup> In other words, YHWH’s relation to the world, given his eternity and self-existence, is necessarily marked

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<sup>83</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 287.

<sup>84</sup>Christopher R. Seitz, *The Elder Testament: Canon, Theology, Trinity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 93.

<sup>85</sup>Cassuto explains the sense of the name YHWH as “It is I who am with My creatures in their hour of trouble and need” (*Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 38).

<sup>86</sup>Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 56.

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