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The Purity of Israel

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“The LORD Called”

“The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting” (Lev. 1:1). The opening line of the Levitical Law recalls both the gravity of Israel’s sin, and the grace of their Lord. The book of Exodus reminds Israel that YHWH, having brought the sons of Abraham out of Egypt, invited them into a covenant relationship at Mt. Sinai. Israel promptly broke this covenant, creating a rift between God and his nation. The book of Exodus ends with Moses unable to enter into God’s presence in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). Leviticus picks up where Exodus left off, with God calling out from his dwelling place in the tabernacle to Moses, who cannot enter due to the rebellion of Israel.¹ Though the situation is dire, Leviticus 1:1 presents the reader with a stunning picture of grace: the sons of Abraham are left in the wilderness, utterly incapable of communing with their God, yet YHWH calls out to them from the tabernacle. The book of Leviticus is God’s instructions for a sinful, corrupt nation to remain in communion with him and live in his holy presence.

I will provide a brief survey and summary of the worship rites of the nation of Israel described in Leviticus and analyze them as they relate to the character and qualities of the God of Israel and mankind’s standing in relationship to Him. Because the end goal of this research is comparison, brief comments on the key details of these categories will be sufficient for my purposes. Then, I will compare and contrast these practices with those of related Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) religious practices in order to shed further light on the unique attributes of the God of the Bible.

¹ Vasholz, Robert I. Leviticus. Fearn, Ross-shire, U.K.: Mentor, 2007. 27.

Israelite Offerings and Observances

Leviticus 1-7 details the major offerings, each with its own unique emphasis: The burnt offering, the peace offering, and the sin offering. The first offering described is the burnt offering (Lev. 1). These offerings consisted of livestock, and thus they were the most costly of the sacrifices. A grain offering would often accompany an animal sacrifice in the burnt offering.² The burnt offering was the most versatile of rituals, used to express a variety of sentiments and concerns. In general, the burnt offering was a way of calling on YHWH to hear the prayers of his people.³ The requirements for the animal were also symbolic of Israel's relationship to YHWH as they approached his throne: A priest was to inspect the animal for blemish or deformity, as YHWH would search the hearts of those who entered into his presence. Michael Morales writes:

Every time an Israelite sought to draw near to God through sacrifice, the animal he presented was symbolically answering the question 'Who shall ascend the mountain of YHWH?' As God probes the heart for moral integrity, so the priest was to probe the animal substitute for blamelessness, evidenced symbolically by the lack of blemishes or defects.⁴

As the Israelites entered the presence of the Lord, the blood sacrifice reminded the worshiper of his standing in relationship to their God, both in terms of the cost required of him as he approached the throne, and the cosmic implications of a blemished heart.

The peace offering (Lev. 3) symbolized a reaffirmation of the covenant relationship between YHWH and the worshiper. The institution of a covenant was often marked by a meal shared between the two parties – a common custom across ANE cultures. In Israelite worship, the peace offering was unique in that it was the only offering in which the worshipper and his

² Vasholz, Robert I. *Leviticus*. 35.

³ Averbeck, R.E. "Sacrifices and Offerings" in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Edited by T. Desmond. Alexander and David W. Baker. Downers Grove, IL: IVP InterVarsity Press, 2008.

⁴ Morales, Michael. *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? : A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*. Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2015. Accessed November 13, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central.

family ate a portion of the sacrifice. The anthropomorphism of the commoner, the priest, and YHWH “sharing a meal” together symbolized peaceful relations between the Lord and his people. Like the burnt offering, the peace offering would have been employed in a variety of ways in Israelite worship, but it was decidedly not for the purpose of *achieving* fellowship with the Lord – it was a celebration of the *reality* of the fellowship between the Lord and His people.⁵

The sin offering (Lev. 5-6) was a blood offering accompanying the confession of sin. The commission of both intentional and unintentional sin required confession and cleansing through a blood sacrifice. The primary function of the sin offering was forgiveness and cleansing.⁶ It was a brutal reminder of the penalty for man’s rebellion against their holy and righteous Creator, and at the same time a striking revelation of a gracious and loving God who withholds his wrath from sinful mankind, and bends hear their repentance and forgive them. One understanding of the “mechanics” of the sin offering suggests that the laying of hands on the animal (v. 4:4 ff.) represented a ceremonial imparting of the sinner’s transgressions upon a sinless creature, which was then slaughtered as a substitute for the repentant worshipper.⁷ Leviticus 16, which is in many ways a focal point of Leviticus, details the *Yom Kippur* sin offering ceremony. This once-a-year offering is sufficient for the removal of the sins of every Israelite – priest and commoner – illustrating the reality that all men are guilty of sinning against YHWH, and only through confession and sinless blood will those sins be cleansed.

⁵ Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub. Group, 2006). 378.

⁶ Vasholz, Robert I. *Leviticus*. 60.

⁷ Morales, Michael. *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?* 128. This view is most plausible, as it best represents substitutionary atonement theology, which points forward to the Day of Atonement and even more so toward Christ’s ultimate atoning sacrifice on the cross.

The guilt offering (Lev. 7) was similar to the sin offering, but with a few distinctions. Namely, the blood of the slaughtered animal would be sprinkled about the altar, as with the burnt offerings and the peace offerings, and not spread on the horns of the altar, which was unique to the sin offering.⁸ Further, the location of the sin offering differed depending on whether the priests were involved. If they were, the animal would be killed at the door of the tent (v. 4:15); if the priests were not involved, the sacrifice would be made at the place of the burnt offering.⁹ Other key differences are involved, however the outcome of the guilt offering remains the forgiveness and cleansing of sins.

Leviticus 23-26 consists of descriptions of a variety of festivals, feasts, and religious observances ordained by YHWH for the purpose of reflection and celebration. These observances represented God's intent for "mankind to be sensitive to the orderly progression of time and to take note of special events that must be recalled and celebrated at set times."¹⁰ Different aspects of God's activity in the nation were recalled: God's creation, specifically his Sabbath rest, was observed on the seventh day of the week. God's deliverance of the Israelites from the land of Egypt was observed during the Passover feast. Israel's dependence upon the Lord for his provision was celebrated during Feast of Firstfruits and the Feast of Weeks. In preparation for the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Trumpets was observed. The Day of Atonement was celebrated during the fall months, and the Feast of Booths was observed at the end of the year. The Feast of Booths was a celebration of YHWH's deliverance of the nation from the land of Egypt. These feasts and celebrations were an active reminder of the origins of

⁸ Vasholz, Robert I. *Leviticus*. 73.

⁹ Henry Norman Snaith. 1965. "Sin-Offering and the Guilt-Offering." *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1): 76.

¹⁰ Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament*. 367.

Israel and the nature of their covenant relationship with YHWH: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2).

Offerings and Rituals in Egypt and Babylon

Now that a working understanding of Israelite ritual has been established, comparisons and points of departure can be observed between the sacrificial and ceremonial rites of the people of Israel and their pagan neighbors across the ANE. How much influence, if any, did these people groups have on the worship practices of Israel? Were there any similarities between the religions of the Egyptians and Babylonians, and the religion of Israel, in terms of the divine’s relationship to humankind, or in their worship practices? If similarities do exist, could skeptics accuse the Israelites of syncretism? These are all important questions for us to assess.

Egypt

In Egyptian worship, priests yielded daily offerings on behalf of the king. Pharaoh maintained authority as the high priest of Egypt and the representation of his people before the gods.¹¹ However, he employed priests to communicate with the gods on his behalf. The priest went through a series of cleansing rituals to transform him into a worthy surrogate for the king as he entered into the temple, which housed the presence of the god. The priest would then approach the statue of the god (the *ka*), which was believed to house the god’s presence (the *ba*) and offer it food and drink.¹² These offerings corresponded to human mealtimes, and were

¹¹ A. H. Armstrong, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 15.

¹² Teeter, Emily. *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Accessed November 15, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. 44-46.

offered three times a day. This was not seen as a symbolic practice: the Egyptians believed that food and drink offerings satisfied the deity's need for daily nourishment.¹³

Another type of offering, known as a votive offering, involved the offering of animals. The priests would raise herds of animals that represented their god's *ba*. They would select an animal, kill it, mummify it, and offer it up to their deity. These animals were not old, sick, deformed, or dying – archeological analysis has shown that the majority of these animal sacrifices were young, choice breeding stock. Animal mummies were thought to bring divine attention upon the worshiper, and motivate the gods to assist them and favor them.¹⁴

Spells and incantations played an important role in Egyptian worship, not least of which was vindication for one's life before the gods after death. Egyptians believed that every person was to sit before a divine court after death and answer for his transgressions. If successful, the individual would be spared from the "second death" and gain access to a realm in which "he regained his integrity, his identity, and his personality."¹⁵ The Egyptian "Book of the Dead" is a compilation of spells and incantations which, when recited, insured the deliverance of a deceased individual from the second death. One such incantation, "Judgment of the Dead", or "Negative Confession of Sin", consists "of a long recitation of sins not committed by the deceased, which enables him to magically pass the judgment."¹⁶ In essence, this long, detailed incantation was thought to allow the deceased individual to broadly cover his bases with wide brush strokes in

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 90-92.

¹⁵ Assman, Jan and David Lorton. "Death as Enemy." In *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 64-86. Cornell University Press, 2005. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt7z5qf.7>.

¹⁶ Bill T. Arnold and Bryan Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002). 118.

order to plead “not guilty” to any sin, known or unknown, committed in the eyes of any god in any realm:

I have not done crimes against people,
I have not mistreated cattle,
I have not sinned in the place of truth,
I have not known what should not be known,
I have not done any harm.

...

O disturber who comes from the
sanctuary: I have not been violent.
O child who comes from the nome of
On: I have not been deaf to MAAT.
O foreteller who comes from Wensi: I
have not quarreled.¹⁷

On the surface, Egyptian offering rituals bear a resemblance to the offering rituals prescribed by YHWH in Leviticus. Israel had a divine representative in Moses, and priests who acted on behalf of the people. The Israelites made use of a physical object in which the presence of YHWH resided, they had prescribed cleansing rituals for their priests, they offered grain and firstfruits for the Lord, and they offered up clean, strong, healthy, blemish-free animals as a way to call on YHWH to hear their requests. Since the Israelites would have had centuries of exposure to Egyptian influence while they were in slavery, do these similarities suggest that Israelite worship was simply an example of an Egyptian pagan practice, observed, borrowed, and “Yawhized” by the people of Israel?

Babylon

As with Egypt, the king was the chief worshiper and the nation’s representative to the gods. Occasionally, he employed other people, such as members of the royal family, as viceroys and mediators between himself and the gods. However, the king was quite involved in

¹⁷ “Negative Confession of Sin” in M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). Used in Bill T. Arnold and Bryan Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002). 118.

Babylonian religious life. The king usually adopted a patron god with whom to have a special relationship. This god would bestow favor upon the king, most importantly during military campaigns and in battle. The king also represented the vehicle through which the gods would bestow material and political blessing upon the nation.¹⁸

The king's most important duty was performed during the New Year's festival, when he humbled himself before the god Marduk and underwent "ritual humiliation" by the high priest. The king would recite an incantation of praise to Marduk and perform a ceremonial washing, to be followed by the removal of his scepter and sword by a priest. The priest would slap the king in the face, drag him by the ears into the sanctuary before the god Bel and force him to his knees, where the king would recite a prayer vindicating his actions over the previous year of his reign:

I did [not] sin, lord of the countries. I was not neglectful of the requirements of your godship. [I did not] destroy Babylon; I did not command its overthrow . . . [I watched out] for Babylon; I did not smash its walls . . . Have no fear . . . that the god Bel . . . The God Bel [will listen to] your prayer . . . he will magnify your lordship . . . he will exalt your kingship.

After this ritual, he was reinstated with full power for another year. The king's relationship to the gods was believed to be essential for the political, social, and economic interests of Babylon. "The connection between Marduk and the king of Babylon clarified the king's role as Marduk's agent in holding back the powers of chaos that continually threatened to devastate Mesopotamia."¹⁹

Another important feature of the Babylonian New Years' festival occurred on the fifth day, which would begin with the purification of the temple through slaughter of a ram, which

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴ Glenn Stanfield Holland, *Gods in the Desert: Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010). 174.

would be dragged through the temple and thrown into a river.²⁰ This represented a ceremonial removal of the sins of the nation as they moved on from the previous year to the new year.

Between festivals, everyday public worship was concentrated in the temple, or *ziggurat*, where a city's patron god was said to reside. The temple consisted of a public worship space for non-priestly commoners, and a private room reserved for priests and other cult personnel. Worship was focused around a physical representation of the god, a statue in which the divine presence resided. It would be washed, dressed in clothing, and "fed" twice a day with food and drink offerings. The food offerings were high-quality portions of meat and produce, complete with plates and utensils for the god's use. Food left over from the offering would feed the temple personnel.²¹

An honest evaluation of these few examples of Babylonian cult rituals unearths several more apparent similarities between the religion the Israelites and those of their ancient near eastern pagan neighbors. Accountability for the actions of the nation was an important aspect of Babylonian ritual, as well as of Israelite worship. Perhaps most striking is the similarity between the cleansing of the temple during the Babylonian New Years' festival and the Day of Atonement sacrifice prescribed in Leviticus, where the death and removal of an animal represented the cleansing and removal of the nation's transgressions. More similarities exist between offering rituals – particularly the Babylonian food and drink offerings and the Israelite peace offering. The food and drink offering and the peace offering both involved the "sharing of a meal" between the divine and the worshiper – the finest choices of meat and produce sacrificed to the deities, with the leftovers feeding the temple workers and their families. Are these further

²⁰ Fennely, James M. "The Persepolis Ritual." *The Biblical Archaeologist* 43, no. 3 (Sum 1980): 135–62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

examples of Israelites borrowing and adapting the more-ancient religious practices of their pagan neighbors?

Considerations for Biblical Study

When it comes to comparing Israelite religion with other ancient faiths, we can indeed observe many similarities. The practice of animal sacrifices and food and drink offerings were not unique to Israel, nor was the concept of accountability to the gods for the actions of the individual and the nation. The Egyptians and Babylonians had yearly festivals, which fell on particular days of the year during which they would celebrate and worship the gods and plea of favor upon the nation. One of the festivals, in Babylon's case, even featured a ritual strikingly similar an Israelite atonement offering. Critics of the Bible often point to these similarities, among others, to support their argument that the Israelite religion was *syncretistic* – accepting and absorbing elements of other religions and fitting them into their mold,²² which they named “YHWH”. Knowing that Israel certainly had extensive contact with Egyptian, Babylonian, and other pagan religions, this phenomenon could explain these apparent similarities. However these similarities are only surface level. Upon closer inspection, any alleged integrations of pagan rituals into Israelite worship only go as far as the execution of the religious rite itself; the apparent similarities in practice denote vastly different meanings, and stark differences in the relationship between the divine and mankind. While the ritual practices on their own appear to have similarities to one another, important contrasts begin to take shape when the purpose of the rituals are considered. While the sacrificial rites of Israel and Egypt do bear at least some resemblance in several key areas, the most important distinction that must be made is not found

²² Goff, Beatrice Laura. “Syncretism in the Religion of Israel.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58, no. 2 (1939): 151–61.

within the process of the rites themselves – it is what the rites reveal about the *deity being worshiped*, and his relationship to humanity.

A Holy God's Pursuit of a Holy People

When comparing the worship practices described in Leviticus to those of pagan religions, is necessary to look closely not only at the common rituals themselves, but also at their perceived function in the human and divine parties involved. The worship of a deity reveals a set of beliefs about that deity, which underscore the worship act. For example, Egyptian, Babylonian, and Israelite worship each involved food and drink offerings for the purpose of calling upon the divine and strengthening the connection between the divine and the worshiper.²³ However, the *purpose* of the worship act is different – at least in the case of Israel. For the Egyptians and the Babylonians, food offerings actually served the function of nourishing the hunger and thirst of the god being worshiped. For Israel, the food offering was a symbol of God's covenant relationship with the nation. This is a vital distinction. That the Egyptians and Babylonians believed their offerings were actually satisfying the physical hunger of their deities implies that the gods of Egypt and Babylonia were not believed to be all-powerful. Whereas YHWH was seen as perfect, all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present the gods of Egypt, Babylonia, and other cultures around the ANE were merely god-like anthropomorphisms. The gods were not eternally superior to human beings; they were simply more powerful than human beings, with limits.²⁴ They were often portrayed as catty, selfish, capricious, unpredictable, lazy, and petulant.

²³ Morrow, William S. *An Introduction to Biblical Law*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014. Accessed November 19, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central.

²⁴ Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012. 44.

Take, for example, the Babylonian creation story in which the gods create humanity in order to offset the heavy workload of caring for the world:

I [Mami] have removed your heavy work
I have imposed your toil on man
You have raised a cry for mankind
I have loosed the yoke, I have established freedom²⁵

With this in mind, it is not surprising that pagan worshipers would expect that their gods needed to be waited on and have all of their own needs met before expending energy doling out blessings to humans. The Israelites, however, did not believe the peace offering satisfied YHWH's physical needs – he has none, after all – but that YHWH had selected them from among the nations to establish his eternal earthly rule through a covenant relationship with them. In Leviticus, it is apparent that YHWH used the traditional covenant-sealing symbol of a shared meal to symbolize his special covenant relationship with Israel. The Israelites did not believe that YHWH was a divine human, but a sovereign, almighty, benevolent, loving, covenant-making Creator God who chose Israel as his own and who was worthy of their worship and devotion.

What, then, do we make of the similarities between the Babylonian New Years' temple cleansing ritual, the king's ritual humiliation, the Egyptian "Negative Confession of Sin", and Israel's Levitical tradition of confession and atonement sacrifices? All of these practices served the function of removal or pardoning of wrongdoing (in Israel's case, sin), either from an individual or from a people group. Can Israel be accused of borrowing the traditions of the Egyptians and the Babylonians and "Yahwizing" them? A closer analysis reveals that, while these practices may seem similar in form, they are very dissimilar in function. Firstly, the Egyptian "Negative Confession of Sin" incantation was believed to be a way to claim innocence

²⁵ Atrahasis, Tablet I, 240-243 in Lambert, W. G., A. R. Millard, and Miguel Civil. *Atra-ḫasīs: the Babylonian Story of the Flood*. 60-61. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999.

for all wrongdoing and avoid damnation from the gods. The Babylonian New Years' rituals served, in theory, to absolve the king and the people of the city of all their wrongdoing and achieve the blessing of the gods for the year to come. There was no expectation of moral uprightness – the rituals were a catchall plea for the good graces of the gods to avoid physical calamity in life, and damnation in death. What set Israel apart, quite literally, was holiness. The doctrine of holiness, or “separation unto God” ²⁶ was completely unique to Israel. That YHWH as a standard of absolute perfection would reach down toward an evil and corrupt humanity, in particular Israel, and call them to holiness and lovingly instruct them on how to live as a nation consecrated to himself was unheard of in the ANE. The Israelite atonement and sin offerings not only covered the sins of the nation, they reminded Israel of her rightful place as YHWH's servant nation. They were not a flowery, empty manipulation of God to avoid destruction.

Concluding Thoughts

Ancient near-eastern pagans believed that the gods were the only thing standing between human civilization, and chaos, death, and destruction. Therefore, rituals, incantations, sacrifices, and religious rites were required to maintain the good graces of the gods so that they may be more inclined to turn a favorable eye toward humanity.²⁷ The Israelites believed that YHWH was the Creator of the universe, sovereign over chaos, who created the world according to his own perfect standard. Chaos and destruction ensued when humanity chose to rebel against the will of the Lord, but that YHWH was calling Israel to be a reflection of his good and perfect creation to

²⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1978). 44.

²⁷ Daniel Isaac Block and A. R. Millard, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000). 32.

the world. Through Israel's obedience to YHWH, all the nations of the world would eventually be reconciled to God and live according to his holy calling.

While cultural similarities do exist between the worship practices of the nation of Israel and their ANE pagan neighbors, the God of the Bible truly reveals himself to be set apart from the rest of the ancient world.

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