

The Notion of Blood in the Old Testament: Blood That Purifies and Blood That Defiles

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Abstract

The central notion explored in this article is the notion of blood and its role, meaning, and significance in the Old Testament. The author tries to answer how blood can be seen as the means of purification or consecration in some Old Testament contexts, but elsewhere as a polluting or defiling substance, and offers a two-level answer. On the first level of his thesis, he believes the context of the functioning of blood to be prescribed by God, while on the second level, attempting to explain the mentioned claim, he argues that regarding blood there exists a certain dichotomy of life and death. Namely, when blood ultimately represents life, it functions as a means of purification and consecration, and when it ultimately represents death, it becomes the substance that pollutes or defiles. To support his thesis, the author gives interpretations and conclusions about the theological implications of certain Old Testament texts and the accompanying examples which point to them. The article is divided into two basic parts. The first part presents the notion of blood in the Old Testament through themes of the blood–life relation, the prohibition of eating of blood, and the place of blood in the Old Testament sacrificial system. The second part is an analysis of specific Old Testament examples showing blood that purifies and consecrates or blood that defiles and pollutes.

Keywords: *blood, sacrifice, sacrificial system, Old Testament, nephesh, eating of blood, the life of all flesh is its blood, purification, consecration, pollution, defilement, life, death*

Introduction

Upon hearing the word “blood,” our first association is probably of a medicinal or anatomical nature, while the word “bloody” primarily produces connotations of violence or perhaps wars, wounds, murders, and such. These associations are of course correct and adequate, as well as true to life. In our everyday conversations we use and hear terms related to blood, such as “in cold blood,” “to have blood on one’s hands,” “bloodbath,” etc.,¹ which show us that, figuratively speaking, blood is all around us. Blood is undoubtedly an anatomical part of our lives, but it seems that it is also a part of our existence in other ways. Interestingly, ancient people groups have concluded that blood was important long before science was able to show it or prove it to them.

The notion of blood still holds a significant place in today’s Christian theology and Church practice (e.g., different Eucharistic theologies and the place of the Sacrament of Eucharist in Christian theology and service, as well as different beliefs about the eucharistic elements of bread and wine). Blood is also present in the Christian “church jargon” (e.g., “Christ’s blood washes my sin,” “Covered by the blood of Jesus,” “Our garments are white as snow because they have been washed by the blood of Jesus,” etc.), in titles of numerous Christian hymns and songs (e.g., “Your Blood,” “Oh, The Precious Blood of Jesus,” “When God Sees the Blood,” etc.), and even more so in their content (e.g., “Miraculous power in the blood of Christ,” “To the old rugged cross, all sprinkled with blood, I will ever be true,” “I’m saved, washed in Christ’s blood,” etc.).

However, what does the Bible tell us about blood? Comprehending the role, significance, and function of blood in the Old Testament is both important and necessary for proper understanding of the significance of blood in the New Testament, especially in the context of Christ’s blood and his sacrifice, as well as for understanding some of the Christian theological foundations, Christian beliefs, and church practices. Yet, due to the scope and importance of this theme, we will only deal with the notion of blood in the Old Testament. Of course, considering numerous occurrences of the notion of blood in the Old Testament in all its linguistic and grammatical variations, this article cannot elaborate on every one of those occurrences, nor dive into their deep and wide exegesis, but can only tackle a few chosen key biblical verses in categories that are closely related to the main theme of study in this article.

Therefore, this article will explore the notion, function, meaning, and significance of blood in its biblical and theological sense in the context of the Old

1 Expressions such as “hot blood,” “blood, sweat and tears,” “blood donor,” “blood related,” “fresh blood,” “blue blood,” “red as blood,” “bloodthirsty,” “to drink one’s blood,” “blood feud,” “blood line,” “bad blood,” “man of flesh and blood,” “bloodless man,” “blood money,” “earned in blood,” etc.

Testament, with a special focus on the dual meaning and function of blood – a substance that purifies and consecrates, but also a substance that defiles or pollutes. The basic template for argumentation and deduction will primarily be the Pentateuch because it is precisely there that we find first occurrences of certain categories and aspects of blood which will prove to be foundational for understanding the theme of this article. The article is structured in two basic parts. The first part talks about the notion of blood in the Old Testament which will be seen through categories of life and death, prohibition of eating of blood, and the place of blood in the Old Testament sacrificial system. The second part will look at several Old Testament examples to better understand two different aspects of blood – the purifying or consecrating aspect and the defiling or polluting aspect.

So, blood in the Old Testament context has a purifying function but also a defiling function. This is primarily so because God prescribed it to the context of man's interaction with blood. God determines the meaning of any substance or matter, such as blood, giving it (prescribing it) function depending on the context it occurs in. So, for example, all animals are God's creatures, but in the context of nutrition, God decided which animal is clean and which is unclean. God, who is the Creator of everything and Ruler over all, ordained it to be thus, and man, although perhaps unable to understand why still needs to trust God and obey his law. It is similar to blood. God decides when blood is purifying and when it is defiling, and all that is left for man to do is to respect that as God's sovereign decree.

However, on the second level of this God's rule about blood; on a human level that deficiently attempts to fathom God's reasons and intentions, it seems that blood carries within itself a certain dichotomy of life and death so that it is possible to observe the functioning of blood through those two aspects. Therefore, more precisely, when blood in certain contexts represents life, it is a purifying or consecrating means, and when it ultimately represents death, it is a defiling or polluting substance. This article will strive to show this on some Old Testament examples.

1. Blood in the Old Testament

The Hebrew word for blood is דָּם [dām], most probably derived from the word אֶדָּם [ādām], concerning the color of blood, from a word suitably meaning “red” (Clippinger 1999), i.e., from the word אֶדֹּם [ādōm] which represents the red color. Also, considering that Adam was made from earth, it is possible to find a connection with the word אֶדְמָה [ādāmāh] that can mean “soil,” “earth,” or “red earth.” The very notion of blood in its linguistic and grammatical Croatian versions appears in the Holy Scriptures more than 400 times,² and around 320 in the Old

2 This article uses the *New International Version*, 2001.

Testament alone. A brief survey of those key occurrences shows that the first explicit appearance of blood on the pages of the Bible takes place very early, in Genesis 4:10, where Cain sheds his brother Abel's blood, and his blood "cries out" to the Lord from the ground. However, although not explicitly mentioned, blood, albeit nonhuman, appears even before that. In Genesis 3 we read that after Adam and Eve sinned, God made them "garments of skin," implying that to get that fur, the blood of a furry animal had to be shed.

Blood in the Bible can sometimes have a literal meaning and can refer to animal or human blood, but it can also have a figurative meaning. So, for example, it can refer to a color that is the color of blood; to have someone's blood on you is to be responsible for the death of that person; an expression that combines flesh and blood refers to all of mankind or a physical man (Hayford 1995); the blood of grapes refers to wine, etc. Of course, it would not be possible to show all possible aspects of blood in this article, especially their numerous occurrences. Therefore, we will limit our exploration on certain, personally chosen, most prominent or most important categories of blood occurrences and blood's place and meaning in specific events we read about in the Old Testament.

Generally speaking, blood is mentioned in the Old Testament in numerous different meanings or contexts, which can be further reduced to several prominent categories: 1) blood that refers to violent death, 2) the relation between blood and life, 3) prohibition of partaking in the blood and 4) blood in the sacrificial system (Potts 2000, 193; Morris 1952, 217). Blood-related violence will not be particularly dealt with, except through the category of the relation of blood and life, which can be used as a lens for its interpretation and understanding, because it is primarily connected to the shedding of blood caused by an act of violence which usually leads to death, and we shall see what that means in the context of blood as life and/or death. Therefore, we will explore the other three categories with important theological implications that contribute to a better understanding of the role and meaning of blood in the Old Testament theological context, and we will especially deal with the dichotomy of life and death contained in blood and its dual nature as a means of purification, but also a substance of defilement. We shall begin by examining the relation and connection of blood and life in the Old Testament.

1.1. Blood and Life

The relation between blood and life in living beings is unbreakably connected, because there is no life without blood, and life necessarily implies blood. Also, it needs to be immediately said that the relation of blood and life in the Old Testament is closely related to the prohibition of eating meat that contains blood, in other words, eating blood in general. However, since both these aspects are im-

portant in their own right, they will be separated into two parts and each aspect will be dealt with individually, while the first one to be considered will be the matter of the relation between blood and life.

As previously mentioned, Genesis 4:10 is the place where blood is explicitly mentioned for the first time, specifically, blood “that cries out to” God “from the ground.” What took place here was a violent murder (Abel murdered Cain), the appearance of death, and God’s cursing of Cain, which are all connected by shed blood (Eyzaguirre 2008, 20). It is unusual to describe blood as something that articulates, verbalizes, or “cries out” and accuses, as if it is a being of some kind, as if it is alive (or as if there is life in it). In Genesis 9:4-6, God forbids eating meat that has its life, *נֶפֶשׁ* [*nephesh*] still in it, i.e., its blood, *דָּם* [*dām*]. Our focus here will be the word *nephesh*. It is translated here as “life,” but it is a word with extraordinarily complex and multiple meanings. So, depending on the context, it can have different meanings, and sometimes it can carry multiple meanings in the same context, which presents a problem even for our understanding of the blood that is *nephesh*. A. C. Eyzaguirre (2008, 5–6) offers a good overview of meanings of that word in different places in the Old Testament, so, depending on the context, it can mean “mouth,” “throat,” “neck,” “breathing in,” “breath,” “hunger,” “craving,” “longing,” etc., but also “soul,” “being,” “life principle,” “life force,” “life,” where these last five renderings are also the renderings that would most suit the meaning of this context where *nephesh* is equated with blood.

Hence, blood is introduced by God as a substance that is a life force in the body, something a body cannot live without. Also, further in the passage, God requires accounting for the shedding of another man’s blood, i.e., for his life. He warns that shedding of another man’s blood will have the same consequences for the one who shed the blood because man is created in the image of God, which again shows us why and how important (man’s) blood/life is to God who is the only one who can lay claim to it.

In Leviticus 17:11, 14, we see God’s claims that “life of the flesh (*nephesh*) is in the blood,” or, “the life of every creature (*nephesh*) is its blood.” The same is repeated in Deuteronomy 12:23 where God says once more that “the blood is the life (*nephesh*),” additionally bolstering the unbreakable link between blood and life. K. Da-Don (2009, 463) explains *nephesh* as the “divine spiritual part” of man’s body that is in his blood which is *nephesh*, so that *nephesh* “circulates through all parts of the human body, giving them life strength: eyesight and other human senses” which “enables all his activity, it all comes from the power of *nephesh*.”

Furthermore, on top of saying that blood is life, God says that he is the one who gives blood (in this case, animal blood), that it belongs to him, and that its function was to be the means of atonement for human lives on the altar, because blood “atones” for life, in the sense that it represents a sacrificial means of atonement with God and is the price of atonement or repentance for human life.

Therefore, since blood is life, it can be the only substitution for another life, as one life is sacrificed for another (Rooker 2000, 236). B. J. Schwartz (1991, 55–56) further observes that this is also the only place in the (Hebrew) Bible where we read that sacrificial blood is the means of ransom for another human life, while in all other places sacrificial blood is the means of purification from sin.

So, based on everything mentioned, it can be concluded that, in the Old Testament understanding, blood is something of a basis, presupposition, or center of physical human life. Reyburn and Fry (1997, 204) believe that this understanding can differ in different nations and cultures, so for some of them, this place might be occupied by head, chest, kidneys, liver, etc., while in Hebrew belief it was blood. However, that which is questionable and somewhat uncertain is whether this was a preexistent Hebrew belief that was then used by God, taking it from their socio-cultural context, or it became such after God revealed his will regarding it.

In any case, the lines where God says that blood is life is important so that we might realize how important and precious blood is to God, and how possessive he seems to be with regards to it. This is important to bear in mind as we continue our studies in the context of blood. God says that life is in the blood, moreover, that blood is life, while he is the Creator of life and owner of every life so that every shedding of blood endangers this God-given life or God-given “life principle” that is his alone; he is the one who gives it, and he is the only one who can take it away (Lyon 1988, 366; Brichto 1976, 22). That is why blood has permanent life value. That is why it is always important and precious. Therefore, one should treat it with the utmost respect because it belongs to him, together with every life. As such, because of its narrow and demonstrably causal-effectual connection to life and death, in God’s eyes, blood is the greatest sacrifice that can be offered (Elwell and Wesley Comfort 2001, 227).

In the next part, we will deal with the subject of the prohibition of eating blood. This prohibition is caused by and based on a belief that blood contains life and in its link to everything we have previously said about the relation between blood and life. This way we can come to a greater understanding of this God-given command.

1.2. Prohibition on Eating Blood

Here we must briefly return to Genesis 9:4 where we see God blessing Noah and his sons, commanding them, “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it,” or as some other relevant translations render it, “But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (ESV and NAS). L. Morris (1955, 81) thinks that the reason for the ban on eating flesh still containing blood is that blood in the meat is closely connected to life, so the shedding of blood points to endanger-

ment and termination of life. While blood is still in the flesh, the body is alive, and when blood starts to separate from the flesh, the flesh begins to die. This is the reason why blood must be respected as a living substance, and as such it must not be eaten.

Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas (2000, 39) point to the fact that meat was not a regular, everyday meal among ancient peoples, but that animals were kept mostly as the source of wool, hair, milk, etc., and that meat was to be eaten only after the death of an animal. Genesis 9:4 shows us that it was not forbidden to eat animals, but it was forbidden to eat blood, so that letting of animal blood from its flesh, i.e., meat that will be eaten, signifies respect toward a God-given life that is in the blood, and which has just been taken by a man it does not belong to. It is important to emphasize that God does not issue this command to Noah and his family alone, but the whole future nation because this command can be found in a similar form elsewhere in the Scriptures.

Hence, in Leviticus 17:1-14 we see how God forbids, but this time to the whole nation of Israel and even the strangers among them, eating or partaking of blood. We have already spoken about the connection of life and blood we read about in these verses, so we will now focus on the topic of blood consummation itself. Therefore, to slaughter a sacrificially appropriate animal (e.g., ox, sheep or goat) for food but not in front of the Tabernacle as an offering to God (Fleming 1994, 59; Walvoord and Zuck 1983, 199; Carson 1994, Lev 17:1), carried the guilt for that animal's shed blood, i.e., for its taken life, and the punishment was rigorous: removal from among the people (Lev 17:1-9). It appears that this probably served to prevent idol worship and perhaps some old customs where the slaughtered animal's blood was poured out in honor and thanks to goat-like deities/demons (satyr, pan, faun, etc.), which was an Egyptian custom (Fleming 1994, 59; Carson 1994, Lev 17:1; Keil and Delitzsch 2002, 593; Freeman and Chadwick 1998, 154; this is why God speaks of "goat idols to whom they prostitute themselves"), and strictly prescribes how and under what conditions should animal flesh be consumed.

Further on in Leviticus 17:10-14, with a triple repetition that blood is life, we see a repeated ban on eating blood. It is generally forbidden to eat any kind of blood both to Israelites and strangers among them, while an inappropriate animal sacrifice could be eaten, but its blood had to be shed and buried in the ground, probably so it would not become somehow defiled through any other outside contact or influence in case it stayed on the surface.

In addition to the fact that blood is life, it is forbidden to eat blood because it is, as we have mentioned earlier, intended by God as a sacrificial means of atonement and reconciliation with God, and not a means of nutrition and refreshment for the human body (Lev 17:11). One can also speculate that one of the reasons for the prohibition might have been the ancient people's extraordinary apprecia-

tion of animal blood, which they highly valued as protein-rich nutrition containing strength and power. They would even cruelly take flesh and blood from living animals (e.g., this is still true among the African tribe Maasai in Kenya and Tanzania, whose members customarily drink animal blood because they believe it gives them strength and stamina. The blood is taken from a cow that is not yet dead, using special ways of draining blood without killing the animal), so God forbids Israelites to eat blood because he wants to disperse their superstitions and prevent (potential) idol worship, as well as remind them once again that the jurisdiction over this vital life substance belongs exclusively to him (Sperling 1992, 761–763; Lee 2019; Spence 2004b, 139).

Deuteronomy 12:15–16, 20-27 restates the prohibition of eating blood, and that blood is life, which is yet again repeated in Deuteronomy 15:23, albeit with a difference. Deuteronomy 12, unlike Leviticus 17, no longer prescribes the necessity to offer the animal intended to be eaten before God in the central sanctuary. However, the prohibition of eating blood is still in place (MacDonald 2016, 195; Walvoord and Zuck 1983, 284). A similar prohibition is found in Leviticus 3:16-17 and 7:22-27, but with an additional element that is worth briefly considering. That element is fat, which is also mentioned in 17:6, but not in the sense of an explicit prohibition of consummation as in the previous two cases.³ Therefore, it is also not allowed to eat fat, or lard because it belongs to the Lord, although it is not completely clear why, i.e., there are no further explanations. This cannot be said of blood and its relation to life since they are mentioned in several places. One of the reasons why that might be so is the fact that the ancient peoples saw the fat or lard part on an animal as its best and richest part, and that was why it belonged to the Lord in the offering of the sacrifice (Carson 1994, Lev 3:1). It is also possible that the Israelites thought that animal fat/lard contained the animal's strength and as such was due to the "Giver of strength" (Hartley 2002, 41). Of course, it could be the case of nutritional/health reasons where God somehow showed his concern for the Israelites' health and did not allow them to eat these, perhaps unhealthy, parts of animal flesh, which is a rationale we find in other prohibitions (e.g., prescribed clean and unclean animals for food, warnings related to the drinking of intoxicating drinks and overeating, commands about hygiene, instructions about contagious diseases, etc. MacDonald 1995, 145; MacArthur 2013, 162; Weisman). In any case, the punishment for eating fat/lard was the same as for consuming blood: being cut off from the people (Lev 7:25, 27).

3 Besides fat, we can also mention another anatomical part of a clean animal which Israelites, that is, Jews, do not eat, for curious reasons. It is called *gid hanasheh*, or *nervus ischiadicus* in Latin, which can be found on the "back side of the thigh" (Da-Don 2009, 305–307) or as it is stated in Genesis 32:33, it is "the tendon attached to the socket of the hip." The reason for this is also found in the biblical text, namely, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon when he wrestled with the angel.

At the end of this part, let us return to blood as the focal point of our consideration. So, taking into account everything we have said, we can simplify things and say that as long as blood is inside a man or an animal, he/it is considered to be a living being. Therefore, to eat flesh still containing blood means, in a way, to eat a living being, “eating of his life,” which God forbids because life belongs to him. Not eating blood, pouring it on the altar, or letting it on the ground, therefore, represents a concrete and visible way to show respect toward that living being, or toward the life that was given by God, as well as toward God himself (Balentine 2002, 148).

1.3. Blood in the Sacrificial System

In the Old Testament ritual-ceremonial system, blood is most clearly seen in the system of animal sacrifices, where blood holds a significant place and plays a visible and essential role and meaning because of everything it represents. However, before we address the significance and meaning of blood in the Old Testament sacrificial system of the Israelite nation, let us briefly survey the Old Testament geographical and religious-cultural context of the surrounding nations and the role blood played in their sacrificial systems. Interestingly, blood was not a basic element of sacrificial offerings nor did it have any special function or meaning in the sacrificial rituals of any other ancient Near Eastern or Mediterranean nation besides Hebrews (Israelites; Pack 2005). Therefore, a possible suggestion that all ancient Semitic peoples generally thought that blood contained life, or that it was connected to life, that it was divine, is not necessarily true. What follows is a survey of key conclusions drawn by Dennis J. McCarthy (1969, 166–176; 1973, 205–210) which support this notion.

Starting from people groups of Mesopotamia, sacrifices to gods were more akin to banquets and consisted of meals served to gods. Although they believed that human blood originated from gods, because man himself was made from dirt mixed with the blood of a murdered god, blood had no special or divine meaning in the sacrificial ritual. Also, blood, unlike water, oil, or milk, had no significance in their purification and consecration rituals, which stands in stark contrast to Hebrew understanding where blood was precisely the means of purification and consecration. On the other hand, Hittites had poured offerings but not necessarily of blood, but more likely of drinks in the context of a sacrificial banquet. Also, in Egyptian religious practices, sacrificial blood had no significance, because sacrifices had more to do with meals with which to “feed” the gods. Furthermore, McCarthy continues, Canaanite and Greek rituals contained an element of offering sacrifices where that which belonged to gods was burned, but, again, there was no special significance given to blood, in the sense that

it might be divine or that it belonged exclusively to gods. Ugaritic people had similar burnt offerings and certain propitiation offerings, but blood was not ritually important for them either. In the Babylonian writings, McCarthy does find the blood motif, but in the sense that blood belonged to the gods of death, and not in the sense that it contained life. Also, in the Greek myths, it is possible to find blood-related to the underworld, in a certain way with the possibility of an illusory or temporary revivification of the dead in the cult of the dead, but here the emphasis is on death, and not on true life. Hittites, and the Semitic-Aegean ancient world in general, saw blood as related to death and not life. In conclusion, McCarthy does not claim that other ancient peoples did not offer sacrifices and poured blood on them, but he believes that the understanding of blood as life and its belonging to God was uniquely characteristic of Hebrews, or Israelites.

So, because of its close aforementioned connection to life, especially in the context of Leviticus 17:11, where we saw the important role of blood as the means to redeem life, blood holds a special meaning in the Old Testament ceremonial/ritual worship system, and especially in the offering of animal sacrifices. However, before the “legal” establishment of this system, as early as Genesis 4:3-4, we see Cain offering a sacrifice of the fruit of the ground, while Abel offered some of his cattle (probably both burnt offerings). Cain’s sacrifice did not involve the shedding of blood, while we can assume that Abel’s sacrifice, although this is not explicitly written, had to involve shedding the blood of offered animals. Moreover, according to some interpretations (MacDonald 2016, 38; The Open Bible 1998, Gen 4:5), the reason why God did not accept Cain’s sacrifice was exactly that it was “bloodless,” and blood had to be present for the sacrifice to be valid.

Furthermore, in Genesis 8:20-21 Noah, in giving thanks to God for saving him from the flood, builds an altar, the first in the Bible, and makes burnt offerings. After that God promises that he will never again destroy life on Earth in such a manner. The text does not show us what exactly Noah did with the blood, but he must have shed the blood of all the animals he offered and burned on the altar. Interestingly, this is immediately followed by God’s blessing of Noah and his sons, and the command not to eat the flesh that contains blood, nor shed the blood of another man, making this the first time he talks to them about the connection between blood and life (Gen 9:1-6).

The making of a covenant between God and his people in Exodus 24:3-8 was preceded by the sacrificing of burnt offerings and peace offerings. In the sacrificial ritual, Moses took the blood of the slaughtered animals and poured one portion of it as a sacrifice on the altar, and sprinkled the other portion on the people of Israel. What we can see in this procedure is that pouring of the blood on the altar is part of the sacrificial ritual, while the act of sprinkling of the people has its additional ritual meaning. Hence, by sprinkling this blood, Moses sealed this

covenant with God, “verifying” the people’s guarantee that they will obey God and his commands and that now the people of Israel and God are connected by blood in a covenant relationship (Elwell and Wesley Comfort 2001, 227).

This symbolic sealing of the covenant through blood was not an uncommon practice of the ancient peoples where sometimes the blood used in the agreement was the blood of a sacrifice, and if either party breached the agreement, it was to share the destiny of that sacrifice (e.g., we see something similar happening in the covenant between Abraham and God in Genesis 15:7-21), and sometimes the two parties making an agreement or a covenant would actually drink each other’s blood and thus seal the agreement (MacArthur 2013, 134; Spence 2004a, 225).

In this blood ritual done by Moses, half of the total amount of blood poured on the altar represented God and his side of the covenant, while the rest of the blood was “poured” on the people and represented their side of the covenant (this is the only time in the Old Testament that the people were thus sprinkled with blood; Walvoord and Zuck 1983, 145), and now both parties were unified through a blood bond. Both sides signed their contract in blood, and when blood is involved, it is always a matter of life and death, and the breach of contract will have serious consequences for the transgressor. Keil and Delitzsch (2002, 424) notice that the inpouring of the blood on the altar, the animal blood substituted the blood and life of the people who have been given to God on the altar, and since this is the same, unique blood, that life is now, through sprinkling, symbolically given back to the people renewed and purified.

Speaking about the dichotomy of life and death with regards to blood in sacrifice, there are several different interpretations when it comes to the question of whether blood in sacrifices ultimately represents life, or sacrificing of life, or whether the emphasis is on imminent death. While, generally speaking, shedding of blood represents a transition from life to death, T. Renz (2001) believes that the sacrificial ritual contains a reverse process: the blood represents the transition from the rule of death into the rule of life. In the ritual of repentance and atonement, blood reminds us of the fact that the animal already gave its life, and that further shedding of blood was not necessary, which reminds one of the first Passover (Exod 12:13, 23). Therefore, according to this view, the sacrificial ritual shedding of blood is ultimately about life. It also points out that, for example, sacrificial shedding of blood is necessary only so that it would bring about the liberation of life, i.e., so that life would be offered as a sacrifice, and that death is not the primary focus, but the life which is being offered (Taylor 1937, 54–55; Morris 1952, 216–227). What is truly important is not the taking of life, but giving of life, because blood is not death, but life (Morris 1955, 77; James 1933, 33). Another view says that death, or the infliction of death, stopping of life, killing is the key because it is primarily death that brings atonement from sin, and not

some “permanent presence of life available for some different function” (Taylor 1937, 54–55; Morris 1952, 216–227). Yet, L. Dewar (1953, 206) thinks that concepts of life and death in the blood are not opposed concepts, but that both ideas are necessary for the correct understanding of the biblical concept of sacrifice because the life that is being given in death is offered to God, which seems like a good attempt to “bridge” these two opposing viewpoints, this dichotomy of life and death which blood signifies.

However, if we look at the observed dynamics of life and death regarding blood, where its purifying function is connected to life, and its defiling function is connected to death, we see that what happens here is the purification from sins of the one for whom the sacrifice is being made and that in some sense this person gains new life. In this analogy, life is the crucial part – one life is sacrificed for another. Therefore, in shedding the blood of an innocent sacrifice on the altar, life conquers death, and the ultimate proof of this, according to New Testament teaching, is the shed blood of the Lamb of God on the altar of the cross. The Lamb of God conquered over the eternal death through the shedding of his blood and gave new and eternal life to all who partake in his blood.

2. Blood That Purifies and Blood That Defiles

Having looked at the significance and meaning of blood in the Old Testament context, as well as different aspects of blood, we finally come to perhaps its most interesting, unusual, and somewhat paradoxical aspect or functionality, wherein certain contexts represent a means of purification and consecration, while in other contexts it is the “pollutant” that pollutes and defiles.⁴

First of all, we need to repeat that God is the one who sovereignly prescribes and determines the way blood will function in a certain context, and what role it will take, which is true of many other things prescribed by his law. However, what can be seen in various examples in the Old Testament is that blood functions as a means of purification and consecration when it renews, or when it is used in the context of life, representing and giving (new) life. In the case of the opposite, when it represents death, when it is a part of a dead body when it is dead, it is the substance that pollutes and defiles the thing or the person it touches or the thing or person that touches it. We will now look at these claims on several Old Testament examples.

4 It is important to emphasize something here. It is the same thing Rabbi Da-Don (2009, 276) points to when he talks about ritual purification, or impurity, in general. Namely, these things do not refer to some “physiological or hygienic state” of an individual, but “exclusively spiritual state.”

2.1. *Blood That Purifies*

The most important emphasis of the functionality of blood in the Old Testament is that it is primarily a means of consecration and purification (Sperling 1992, 761–763). So far in our study of the notion of blood in the Old Testament context, we have spent most of our time dealing with its “positive side” or function, when it ultimately represents life, hence, when it purifies and consecrates. Based on Leviticus 17, we spoke about blood as the means of atonement that brings reconciliation between God and people, and a renewed life which it has purified of pollution and sin. So, since God had said that blood is life, that it contains life, that it is life given from God – God gives it the power to purify (McCarthy 1969, 169). More specifically, he gives it its function as a means of ritual purification from the pollution of sin and prescribes it that function in that context.

Regarding this God-prescribed way and context, Leviticus 17, for example, confirms that sacrificing an animal and shedding of its blood will not inherently have the effect of purification unless everything had been done on a God-prescribed location – the altar before the Tabernacle. Moreover, not only will blood intended for the sacrifice offered outside the altar not bring about purification but, on the contrary, it will cause the individual to be responsible for the blood that was shed and he/she will have to be punished through banishment from God’s people. That is why K. C. Hanson (1993, 215–230) emphasizes that the ritual of this blood purification must be done by an “authorized professional” on an “authorized location,” or it will cause pollution. The only “authorized” way of cleansing was possible in a God-prescribed place and manner. Further, Hanson aptly summarizes the context of blood when it functions as a means of purification:

Animal blood used in sacrifices is seen as a purifying agent, a detergent. The pollution of the priests, leadership, community as a whole, or sanctuary is symbolically cleansed by the right performance of the blood ritual. The correct blood (e.g., bull or goat) is ritually manipulated in the prescribed manner and sequence (e.g., offered, sprinkled, dipped in) in the prescribed location (central sanctuary) by the correct person (Aaronite priest) effects purgation of pollution. (1993, 215–230).

God clearly and minutely, many times and in many places, prescribes to the Israelites in the Old Testament, and especially in Leviticus, how to live and worship God, how to behave in different situations and contexts, as well as what to do when offering a sacrifice, and in other rituals. From these instances, it is immediately visible that animal blood is inevitable, and therefore crucial for the sacrifice to be at all possible. If we take into account everything we have said about blood, this is not surprising. But, besides blood that is being shed in the act of sacrifice for purposes of purification and consecration, we should consider some accompanying rituals related to blood that purifies and consecrates.

We have already considered Exodus 24 and Moses' act of sprinkling the people with sacrificial blood, where God, in effect, cleansed the people and sanctified them as his "holy people" (Durham 2002, 344). A bit later in Exodus 29, we read about the consecration of Aaron and his sons for priesthood. In addition to the usual offering of sacrifices, here we see another ritual related to blood (29:20-21). God prescribed a ritual for Moses to perform that would consecrate Aaron and his sons for priesthood. One of the things he had to do was to slaughter a ram. Before its blood was poured on the altar, he had to take some of its blood and put it on the lobes of their right ears, thumbs of their right hands, and on the big toes of their right feet, and then pour blood against the sides of the altar, take some of that blood and sprinkle it on their garments. Putting blood on their extremities was an act of consecration and probably represents blood purification of sins from all areas of their lives, so that ear represents consecration for obedience and listening to God's holy words; hand represents consecration for holiness in acting and serving, while leg represents consecration for walking in holiness and service to God (MacDonald 2016, 119; Walvoord and Zuck 1983, 153; Carson 1994, Exod 29:1). The mixture of blood and oil that was used to sanctify their garments was a consecration of their ministry and dedication of their "work clothes" that represents the priestly ministry they will be performing (Janzen 2000, 361). Here we see a similarity with Exodus 24 where Moses consecrated the people by sprinkling them into a holy covenant with God. The sprinkling of garments with blood is also a way to physically, in a very visible manner, signify them as those who have been purified and consecrated to be God's ministers (Walton, Matthews and Chavalas 2000, 112). The shed blood of the sacrifice was holy and it represented Aaron and his sons' victory over death; their lives were purified and returned to them so that they could be set apart to serve God (Spence 2004a, 296).

There are other places in the Old Testament where we see examples of consecration and purification by blood, but it is not people who are being sanctified but objects, or space. So, for example, Leviticus 8 is parallel to Exodus 29, but this time the focus is on explicitly mentioned purification and consecration of an altar (Lev 8:15). There we see Moses using the blood of the sacrifice to clean and consecrate the altar, thus performing a ritual of atonement between God and the people. What was he cleaning it from and why did he consecrate it again after consecrating it with oil earlier (Lev 8:11)? Because, moments before, the altar was impure due to the sins of the priests that were laid on the guilt offering and "poured" on the altar and has to be cleaned and consecrated again, but this time with blood, and so finalize the ritual of atonement (Keil and Delitzsch 2002, 546). Complementary to this, in Leviticus 16:16-19 we see the same ritual is performed over the altar and the whole sanctuary on the Day of Atonement "because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been" (Lev 16:16). T. Renz sees blood in this ritual as a means that purifies every unclean-

ness that would defile the holiness of the sanctuary and the altar. J. Milgrom calls this blood “a ritual detergent” and thinks that blood absorbs the sin and becomes unclean, while N. Kiuchi adds that blood points to the transition from the rule of death to the rule of life and holiness (Renz 2001; Kiuchi 1987; Milgrom 1991).

Finally, there is one more example in Leviticus 14:33-57 concerning leprosy in the house. In 14:52-53 we see how a house is cleansed from sin through the sprinkling of sacrificed bird’s blood. So, again, blood here has its purifying function – it cleanses from sin and is a part of the atonement ritual. Perhaps we could say that blood in this case represents a victory of life over spiritual death caused by sin, but also a victory of life over physical death that leprosy, like a fatal disease, can cause.

In the following and final section of this article, we will briefly consider several examples of blood in the Old Testament when it was a “negative reagent,” that is, when it did not serve as a means of purification and consecration, but as a means of pollution and defilement.

2.2. Blood That Defiles

Blood is primarily pure and holy; it is life, and it gives life. It is a means of reconciliation and blessing for sinners, but exclusively through strict, God-prescribed terms. So, earlier, in the example of Leviticus 17:1-9, we saw that blood, when used in the wrong context, can easily have the opposite effect from the one desired, so that instead of purifying, it defiles, and even condemns the individual who shed it or has been in touch with it. If we linger a bit longer in that chapter of Leviticus, in lines 15-16 we see that the person who would eat the flesh of an animal that either died on its own or was killed by other animals, would become unclean and had to be cleansed through washing their clothes and bathing in water. A failure to do so would result in the person being responsible for the blood and life of that animal. The dead animal, of course, was not suitable for sacrifice, and it is questionable how suitable it was for food (for example, in Lev 14:21 this was later forbidden to the Israelites). The individual, in this case, was unclean because he/she “touched” death, the dead body, “dead blood” from the flesh of an animal that was still not drained. Also, we have seen a few Old Testament examples where eating of blood was strictly forbidden, and in those cases, we saw that blood functioned in two ways: through eating blood, the man was polluted, but he also, through showing such disrespect to blood, in fact, “polluted” or defiled blood itself and its life sanctity.

Furthermore, the useless shedding of blood, and especially man’s blood, is a defilement of the blood and the life it carries, but also pollution and defilement of the land it was shed on. So already Abel’s blood in Genesis 4:10-11 “cried out from the ground” which “opened its mouth to receive” blood, and “whoever

sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed” (Gen 9:6). Numbers 35:31-34 talk about this, about bloodshed (ESV, NAS: “blood”) that defiles (ESV, NAS) and dishonors the land in the midst of which God dwells among his people (Num 35:34) and that the ransom for the shed blood and the means of purification of the land was, in fact, the blood of the one who shed it. If the land is not cleansed by the blood of the one who shed innocent blood, by the life of the murderer for the innocent life he took (a procedure opposite to sacrifices where innocent blood is offered for the guilty), God will no longer be able to dwell there (Walton, Matthews and Chavalas 2000, 170; MacArthur 2005, 192). Therefore, since these examples are about shedding blood that is murder, unauthorized taking of a person’s life, this blood pollutes and defiles because it represents death.

Let us now consider two interesting, complex, and somewhat intriguing Old Testament examples where blood functions as a pollutant: one is postpartum blood, and the other menstrual blood. Let us first look at menstrual blood. Leviticus 15:19-30 prescribes in detail how a woman is to behave during her genital bleeding and after it. Here we see a repeated emphasis on the woman’s impurity due to her bleeding, and that anything and anyone she touches during her bleeding will be unclean, as well as anything and anyone that touches something she touched. Additionally, if the bleeding would occur outside of her regular monthly cycle or if it would continue longer than usual, at the end of her bleeding she had to offer a sacrifice of two pigeons or two doves so that the priest might perform the atonement ritual over her before God, “for the uncleanness of her discharge.” If we look at Leviticus 15:1-18, we will see that almost the same prescriptions exist for men who have some sort of a bodily discharge that is not an emission of semen (these are probably some venereal diseases or infections of sexual organs, such as gonorrhea that causes infectious discharges that can last a long time; Fleming 1994, 58; Carson 1994, Lev 15:1).

However, let us return our attention to female genital bleeding. So, we can see that due to her menstrual bleeding, a woman is considered unclean for seven days. Still, she does not have to offer a sacrifice after her menstrual period, but only when her genital bleeding is longer than or unrelated to her regular monthly cycles, in which case she has to be atoned for with God after seven days of purification since she stopped bleeding have passed (Lev 15:25-30). Since a woman with menstrual bleeding must offer the same sacrifices as a man with a discharge, it seems that she is not “guilty” in some special way for the blood, as if she had directly or intentionally caused the blood to be shed, so that she had to offer a sacrifice. Still, the blood had to be atoned for and reconciled through a prescribed ritual. Also, the fact remains that she is unclean both because of her menstrual bleedings which are not due to an infectious disease, but a natural bodily cycle, and because of those bleedings that might be illness-related. It is difficult to offer

a comprehensively clear explanation why this is so, except for the fact that this is what God prescribes for any type of bodily discharge, in both women and men.

However, female genital blood can be interpreted as connected to death in the sense that bleeding points to the fact that there was no conception in female reproductive organs, in other words, life was not quickened (Janowitz 2015, 195; Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas 2000, 129). In a certain manner, we could connect this to the thesis that blood pollutes when it is associated with death, which is possible in this case, and which is especially evident in, for example, miscarriage where the course of life is being stopped; death takes place and the genital bleeding that ensues falls in the category of a discharge that is outside of the regular monthly discharge, which could be said to fall under mentioned legal stipulations.

And finally, we come to the last Old Testament example of blood that defiles. It is closely connected to the previous one, and we will use Leviticus 12:1-8 to briefly examine the Old Testament legal stipulation about a woman's impurity caused by postpartum blood, which is, again, a type of female genital bleeding. In short, when a woman gives birth to a male child, she is considered unclean for seven days, just like when she has her menstrual cycle, but she needs to spend additional 33 days to be purified of her blood. In the case of a female child, she is unclean for 14 days and additional 66 days. Afterward, she needs to offer a burnt offering and a sin offering so that the priest can perform a reconciliation ritual and for her to be "cleansed from her bleeding."

As with the previously mentioned cases of female genital bleeding, it is very difficult to correctly explain why a woman is considered impure (because of her bleeding) after giving birth, especially because giving birth means bringing a new life to this world. However, this may be connected to the impurity of sin which is present in a man already at his conception and birth (Ps 51:7; Fleming 1994, 57; MacDonald 2016, 136) and that consequently, man is in fact "born into death;" not only the inevitable physical death but also spiritual, until he is reconciled to God through the blood of the sacrifice. Of course, this does not mean that the act of conception or birth is sinful, unclean, or immoral, but it relates to the original sinfulness of man and his nature (Carson 1994, Lev 12:1).

On top of that, one also does not understand why the pollution and purification period for a female child is double in length. This might be because it is presupposed that a female child will one day have her menstruations, i.e. that she will have children herself, which Eyzaguirre calls "being born in the state of premenstrual pollution," and perhaps that is why the mother of a female child has to go through a double period of pollution and purification (Eyzaguirre 2008, 48; Carson 1994, Lev 12:1; Mays 1996, Lev 12:1). One interpretation is that the boy, unlike a girl, is purified through the ceremony of circumcision on the eighth day, so that the mother must go through the time of purification for her own sake, and

not his (Criswell 1997, Lev 12:2). However, the theme of this article requires us to emphasize that, although the ritual of circumcision is a ritual involving blood, in the Old Testament we do not see explicitly that circumcision, as a kind of a blood ritual, is also a ritual of purification done by blood, but possibly the removal of bodily “pollution” in the form of the foreskin on the male organ which might be symbolically interpreted as some sort of spiritual cleansing. That is why the ritual of circumcision is not a part of the scope of this article.

Some theologians suggest that postpartum impurity could perhaps serve as a reminder and emphasis that woman (Eve) was the first one through whom sin entered the world (Elwell 1996, Lev 12:1; MacArthur 2005, 150). It is possible that these rules were purely health-related, wherein God, as is the case with other female genital bleedings, preserves woman’s health by removing her and the newborn child from the community and prescribes a necessary time for the woman to recover (which also keeps her husband away from sexual activity) while keeping the child from visitors and possible contagious diseases. This remains to be something of medical practice, so that postpartum mother and her newborn have no outside visitors for 30 – 40 days (or more), for safety reasons.

Be that as it may, a woman is considered impure after childbirth because of her postpartum blood, which calls for a ritual of reconciliation, followed by a prescribed sin offering and a burnt offering. It is important to point out here that she does not offer a sacrifice for her newborn child, but herself, because of her blood, and it is quite unclear what is she exactly guilty for regarding this blood so that it should be atoned for and reconciled. Therefore, theologians/commentators of these Bible lines usually abstain from attempts to explain the reason for a woman’s impurity and the double length of her purification period in the case of a female child, while the precise reason for the necessity of atonement is mostly vague. There are different attempts to interpret this, from some blood demons who want to steal the newborn; the fact that this whole thing revolves around a woman through whom sin entered the world and the heritage of Eve; to the fact that by giving birth among the people she somehow contaminates the altar, so she has to offer a sacrifice to be reconciled and purified. However, R. S. Hess suggests a possible reason that is similarly applicable to menstrual blood or man’s seed, and that in a way supports the thesis of this article. Namely, he thinks that the act of secretion of these bodily fluids is not something sinful in itself, nor does it make the person secreting it sinful, but that it relates to the problem of losing or wasting these life fluids that are connected to fertility and childbirth, and therefore, with life, so that they are being pollutants when not used for those purposes. More specifically, Hess sees postpartum blood as the life fluid that was henceforth life nutrition of a new life (according to Longman and Garland 2008, Lev 12:6-8) but is that no longer, having become “dead” because it no longer fulfills its primary life function, thereby becoming a pollutant.

Finally, the primary reason for a woman's postpartum impurity and the necessity of reconciliation is that this is a God-prescribed context wherein blood serves the function of a pollutant. We have also seen that giving birth can in a way be connected to sin and defilement of man and the inevitable physical, but also spiritual death caused by that sin. Therefore, that could also be the reason why the postpartum blood functions as a pollutant despite the context of new physical life. Perhaps the reason is in the fact that this is a physical life of a sinful being, albeit newly born, and, therefore, an inherently sinful man who was brought into this world by his mother, so that is why she is "guilty" for it as if she is "guilty" for transmitting sin and death to him through birth, while spiritual quickening, (new) birth and life of the child is yet to begin after he/she becomes a member of the Israelite nation and a partaker of their religious system based on blood that purifies from sin and gives new "spiritual" life.

Conclusion

The notion of blood, its meaning, and importance in the Bible is extraordinarily complex and layered, but also very interesting. This is because there are numerous theological and other aspects of blood one can explore. However, these things cannot be done in a single article, so my main goal was to present the notion of blood in one of its aspects, namely, blood that is sometimes purifying and sometimes defiling. To tackle this, it was first important to establish what blood represents to God, i.e., what he says that blood is for him and what it should be for people, so it was important to explain the connection between God, blood, and life. Furthermore, since God explicitly prohibited the eating of blood on more than one occasion, this is a very important command, and it was crucial to see why this is so. Also, since the sacrificial system was the backbone of the Jewish religious system, and blood in this picture could be called it's bone marrow, it was necessary to understand what blood represented in this system, what it did, what was its function and role.

Hence, the thesis attempting to answer the question of blood that both purifies and defiles has been established on two levels. The first level is that God is the one who prescribes the context of blood functioning. In the same way, he determines/prescribes which animals are clean, and which unclean (Lev 11), he determines what is holy and what is unholy. Perhaps stated this way the thesis seems too simple, but it is based on God's Word, words uttered by God himself, and as such, the author of this article sees it as factual, binding, and authoritative. On the second level, which attempts to grasp and rationally answer why God prescribed things in exactly this way, it claims that in understanding blood as the means of purification it is possible to find connections to life. In other words, in the context of purification, blood ultimately represents life. On the other hand, where blood

ultimately represents death, it functions as a pollutant. We have tried to view the thesis based on chosen Old Testament examples where we were able to see that it was truly possible, sometimes more and sometimes less directly, to associate blood that purifies as the one that ultimately represents life and the blood that defiles as the one that is related to death or has the ultimate meaning of death.

If we widen our theological horizons and see things from the perspective of theology which sees sacraments as outward signs through which God mediates his grace, we could say that God grants a certain “sacramentality” to blood, whereby, as an earthly substance in a God prescribed context, it receives its sacral or sacramental dimension. Truly, in the positive aspect of blood that purifies, God mediates his grace to an individual, his family, and his people, through the blood of the sacrifice that has been offered at the altar – the grace of consecration, the forgiveness of sins and renewed life. For example, we can observe a similar thing in the sacrament of Eucharist where the substances of bread and wine stop being regular substances and physical food and become sacramental and sacral elements (moreover, in the Catholic understanding, they become the Lord’s true body and blood), in other words, spiritual food. Even with the second sacrament, baptism, we notice a similar contextual situation regarding water. Outside the sacramental context, water is just a regular liquid that can be drunk, washed, or bathed in, while baptism in the name of the Triune God, depending on one’s theological perspective, represents a covenant with God when one becomes a part of the Church/God’s people, purification from sin, death of the old man and the resurrection of the new, new life, etc. Another example is oil, which in itself represents a dietary supplement, but when one is praying for the sick (or in the Catholic view, in the sacrament of anointing of the sick), i.e., when the sick are being anointed with oil and prayed for, it obtains a sacral/sacramental significance. However, it remains interesting that, unlike all the examples mentioned, only blood has such pronounced two-fold contrastive function and meaning, which can be both “positive” and “negative,” and both “purifying” and “defiling.”

Finally, there remains hope that this article will provide at least a small contribution to the (re)construction of something one might call, if not quite “bloody theology,” then at least the theology of blood, because the blood in the Old Testament biblical context has wide theological implications important for better understanding of the Jewish foundations that Christian theology was added to, for better understanding of certain Christians beliefs and doctrines, but also a better understanding of one’s salvation and relationship with God, as well as Christian worship and service in general.

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Dalibor Kraljik

Pojam krvi u Starome zavjetu: krv koja čisti i krv koja onečišćuje

Sažetak

Središnji pojam kojim se bavi ovaj članak jest pojam krvi i njezina uloga, značenje i značaj u Starome zavjetu. Autor se bavi pitanjem kako je moguće da je krv u pojedinom starozavjetnom kontekstu sredstvo čišćenja ili posvećenja, a u nekom pak drugom kontekstu tvar koja onečišćuje ili oskvrnjuje, te nudi odgovor na to pitanje na dvije razine. Na prvoj razini svoje teze smatra da je kontekst funkcioniranja krvi ustvari propisan od Boga dok na drugoj razini, nastojeći ponuditi objašnjenje navedene tvrdnje, iznosi argumentaciju kako se kod krvi radi o svojevrsnoj dihotomiji života i smrti gdje krv kada ultimativno predstavlja život funkcionira kao sredstvo koje čisti i posvećuje dok tamo gdje ultimativno predstavlja smrt postaje tvar koja onečišćuje ili oskvrnjuje. Kako bi potkrijepio svoju tezu, autor daje tumačenje i iznosi zaključke o teološkim implikacijama pojedinih starozavjetnih tekstova i pripadajućih primjera koji na to ukazuju. Članak je podijeljen na dva osnovna dijela te je tako u prvome dijelu predstavljen pojam krvi u Starome zavjetu kroz teme odnosa krvi i života, zabrane blagovanja krvi te mjestu krvi u starozavjetnome žrtvenome sustavu. U drugom dijelu analiziraju se pojedini starozavjetni primjeri kojima se daje prikaz krvi koja čisti i posvećuje, odnosno krvi koja onečišćuje i oskvrnjuje.