

Loyalty and Scope of Expiation in Numbers 15

Roy E. Gane, Andrews University

Introduction

Numbers 15 presents two sets of problems. The first involves apparent absence of literary cohesion between diverse laws and a brief narrative (vv. 32-36), which are seemingly unrelated to their surrounding context.¹ Sandwiched between accounts of major rebellions (chaps. 13-14, 16-17) and interrupting their sequence, Numbers 15 prescribes grain and wine accompaniments to whole burnt (עֹלֹת) and חֲבִיטִים sacrifices (vv. 1-16), a first-processed offering of dough (vv. 17-21), and purification (טָהֳרָה) offerings for inadvertent faults, but not inexcusable “high-handed” (רָעָה רָעָה רָעָה) offenses (vv. 22-31). Then the text reports the capital offense of a man who gathered sticks on Sabbath (vv. 32-36). The chapter ends by instructing the Israelites to put tassels on their garments as a reminder to keep all the Lord’s commandments (vv. 37-41). At first glance, Numbers 15 could appear to be a kind of literary *genizah* to preserve miscellaneous pericopes.²

The second set of problems concerns ritual and legal differences between Numbers 15 and Leviticus, especially including the following:

1. Leviticus 4:14 requires a purification offering bull for the inadvertent sin of the Israelite assembly, but Numbers 15:24 calls for a burnt offering bull plus a male goat for a purification offering.

¹See, e.g., Martin Noth, *Numbers* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 114; Gordon Wenham, *Numbers* (TOTC; Leicester, U.K./Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1981), 126; Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 117; Eryl Davies, *Numbers* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 149-50.

²Cf. Dennis Olson: “The alleged ‘junk room’ of Numbers...” (*Numbers* [IBC; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1996], 101).

2. Leviticus 4 prescribes purification offerings for inadvertent sins of the high priest, the assembly, a chieftain, and any other individual Israelite, but Numbers 15:22-29 only covers the assembly and the individual.³

3. Leviticus 5:1, 20-26 (Engl. 6:1-7) provide for sacrificial expiation (*pi 'el* of כִּפֹּר) in cases of non-defiant deliberate sins, but Numbers 15 does not include a remedy for this category of moral faults. Rather, “high-handed” sinners are simply condemned to the terminal divine penalty of “cutting off” (כָּרַת; vv. 30-31).

The present paper will show that further investigating relationships between Numbers 15 and Leviticus can shed light on the question of literary cohesion.

Progress in Recognizing Literary Cohesion

Scholars such as Gordon Wenham and Dennis Olson have made considerable progress in recognizing some factors that unify components of Numbers 15 and link them to surrounding narratives. For one thing, verbal elements are reiterated in various parts of Numbers 15 and/or shared by this chapter and the preceding revolt narratives (chaps. 11-14).⁴ Among these is the reference to coming (בֹּא) into the land (אֶרֶץ), which introduces the first two laws in Numbers 15 (vv. 2, 18) concerning agricultural products (grain, wine, dough) of Canaan, and which connects to the scouts episode (13:27, 14:3, 8, 16, 24, 30, 31). Following the rebellion attending the scouts’ report (chaps. 13-14), when the Lord had condemned the older generation to die in the wilderness (14:21-23, 26-35),

³Davies, *Numbers*, 156.

⁴Olson, *Numbers*, 91-2, 97; Wenham, *Numbers*, 126-7.

Numbers 15 implicitly reinforces the divine promise that the younger generation would enjoy the Promised Land.⁵

There is a thematic link between Numbers 15:22-36 (purification offerings; “high-handed” sin; wood-gatherer), warning against covenant disloyalty to God, and the rebellion narratives of chapters 11-14 and 16-17, where examples of individual and communal sins abound.⁶ The man gathering wood on Sabbath (15:32-36) is a microcosm of the adult Israelites condemned to death in the wilderness because they refuse to accept God’s gifts, including freedom from slavery to work.⁷

On the other hand, tassels (צִיָּצִי) on garments (vv. 37-41) positively encourage loyalty by reminding Israelites to obey all the Lord’s commandments (cf. v. 22) and be consecrated to him, instead of exploring (הִוֵּהוּ) wherever their hearts or eyes would lead and committing (spiritual) promiscuity (הִנָּח; v. 39). This passage connects to chapters 13-

⁵Emphasized by the refrain “throughout your generations” (Num 15:14, 15, 21, 23, 38), and the repeated reminder in v. 41 that the Lord remains Israel’s God. Dennis Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* (Chico: Scholars, 1985), 171-4; idem, *Numbers*, 97, 99; cf. Ibn Ezra and Ramban on Num 15:2; Wenham, *Numbers*; 127-8; Milgrom, *Numbers*, 117.

⁶Olson, *Numbers*, 98, 100; Jay Sklar, “Num 15:30-31 as Backdrop to Heb 10:26,” SBL paper, Biblical Law Section (November 24, 2008), 6. Olson suggests that “the present form of Numbers 15 involves a collection of material brought together under the theme of the significance of intentionality in determining the degree of guilt and punishment” (*Death of the Old*, 167; cf. 173-4; idem, *Numbers*, 96). Placement of purification offering legislation in Num 15 supports Baruch Levine’s observation: “The covenant, and the only-to-be-expected violations of it represent the larger framework within which the *ḥattā’ot* sacrifice functioned” (*In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (SJLA 5; Leiden: Brill, 1974), 103. Mary Douglas explains placement of Numbers 15 differently in terms of thematic parallels with chaps. 18-19 (both legal sections dealing with “offerings & purification”) within her “ring” structure of the book of Numbers (*In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* [JSOTSup 158; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993], 118, 122, 146-7, 150-51).

⁷Shown by his gathering (קָשַׁף) stuff (vv. 32-33; cf. Exod 5:7, 12 gathering straw for the pharaoh); Tzvi Novick, “Law and Loss: Response to Catastrophe in Numbers 15,” *HTR* 101 (2008): 5-7; cf. Mathilde Frey, “The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: An Exegetical and Theological Study,” Ph.D. dissertation in progress, Andrews University. His stoning by the community (15:36) contrasts with the rebellious Israelites’ failed attempt to stone Caleb and Joshua, the faithful scouts (14:10; Olson, *Numbers*, 98).

14, where the scouts' report of exploration (וַיִּסְּרוּ; 13:2, 16, 17, etc.; 14:34) incited the Israelites to unfaithfulness (וַיִּזְנוּ), lit. “promiscuity”; 14:33) toward God.⁸

Also contributing to unity of Numbers 15 is expansion of legal scope/application, by comparison with corresponding laws elsewhere. For example, verses 1-16 widen the application of sacrificial accompaniments from some particular occasions (e.g., Lev 23:12-13, 18; Num 6:17) to every performance of a whole burnt or מִזְבֵּחַ sacrifice. Also, the community responsible for observing several laws in Numbers 15 is broadened to include resident aliens (vv. 14-16, 26, 29; cf. v. 30; compare Lev 4).⁹

Although Eryl Davies acknowledges progress regarding literary cohesion of Numbers 15, he is not satisfied: “But why an editor should have grouped together the laws contained in vv. 1-16, 17-21, 22-31, and why he should have included the legislation contained in the present chapter at this particular point in Numbers, must remain as much a mystery here as in the case of the similar collection of laws contained in chs. 5f.”¹⁰

Ritual and Legal Differences to Leviticus

Of the three major differences between Numbers 15 and Leviticus, the third—limitation of expiation to inadvertent sins in Numbers 15—has been satisfactorily explained. So I will summarize regarding this issue and then move to the other problems,

⁸Wenham, *Numbers*, 126; Milgrom, *Numbers*, 127; Olson, *Numbers*, 98-99; Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 622. There is also a link to chap. 16. To each tassel is attached a cord of violet color (15:38), reminiscent of violet cords belonging to the high priestly garments (Exod 28:28, 37; 39:21, 31). This would remind the Israelites to keep themselves holy to God as a nation of his royal priests (cf. Exod 19:6; Milgrom, *Numbers*, 127-28, 411, 413-14). But in Numbers 16, Korah & Co. mistakenly and rebelliously refer to this holiness of the whole people as an argument against the religious leadership of Moses and Aaron (v. 3; *ibid.*, 131; Olson, *Numbers*, 100).

⁹*Ibid.*, 92-4.

¹⁰Davies, *Numbers*, 149-50.

namely, different sacrificial victims for communal inadvertent sin, and limitation of offerers to the community and individual.

Limitation of Expiation to Inadvertent Sins

The fact that Numbers 15:22-31 identifies only expiable inadvertent and inexpiable “high-handed” sins could lead one to suppose that the latter (vv. 30-31) must include all deliberate sins, so that the two categories cover the entire spectrum of moral faults.¹¹ However, elsewhere some deliberate sins are expiable, whether by a purification offering (Lev 5:1, 5-6) or a reparation offering (5:20-26 [Engl. 6:1-7]; Num 5:5-8).¹²

Interpreters have attempted to resolve the tension in various ways, including by expanding the inadvertent category to include some sins committed deliberately.¹³ But Numbers 15 simply does not cover all kinds of moral faults: It leaves a gap between inadvertent sins and “high-handed” offenses, which are defiantly committed sins of deliberate apostasy.¹⁴ In the gap are expiable non-defiant deliberate sins. So there is no

¹¹So Gary Anderson, “The Interpretation of the Purification Offering (הַזָּבַח) in the Temple Scroll (11QTemple) and Rabbinic Literature,” *JBL* 111 (1992): 19, 30-31.

¹²P. Saydon, “Sin-Offering and Trespass-Offering,” *CBQ* 8 (1946) 397.

¹³See, e.g., Jacob Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience: The Asham and the Priestly Doctrine of Repentance* (SJLA 18; Leiden: Brill, 1976), 109-10; Bradley McLean, “The Interpretation of the Levitical Sin Offering and the Scapegoat,” *SR* 20 (1991): 348; Baruch Levine, *Numbers 1-20* (AB 4A; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 398. For detailed review of attempts to reconcile Num 15 with other passages, see Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 205-13; idem, “Numbers 15:22-31 and the Spectrum of Moral Faults,” in *Inicios, paradigmas y fundamentos: Estudios teológicos y exegeticos en el Pentateuco* (ed. Gerald Klingbeil; River Plate Adventist University Monograph Series in Biblical and Theological Studies 1; Libertador San Martin, Entre Rios, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2004), 149-156.

¹⁴On these sins as defiant, see, e.g., Adrian Schenker, “Das Zeichen des Blutes und die Gewissheit der Vergebung im Alten Testament,” *MTZ* 34 (1983): 205; idem, “Interprétations récentes et dimensions spécifiques du sacrifice *ḥaṭṭāt*,” *Bib* 75 (1994): 65, 69; idem, *Recht und Kult im Alten Testament* (OBO 172; Freiburg/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 121; C. Labuschagne, “The Meaning of *b’yād rāmā* in the Old Testament,” *Von Kanaan bis Kerala* (Fs. for J. P. M. van der Ploeg; AOAT 211; Kevelaer/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker/Neukirchener, 1982), 145, 146, 148. Wenham relates Num 15 to “deliberate apostasy” in Heb 10:26ff (*Numbers*, 131). Jay Sklar has emphasized that in Numbers 15:30-31, “high-handed” sinners are also described as blaspheming the Lord, despising his word, breaking his commandment, and condemned to “cutting off.” Such a person “is not simply committing intentional sin; he or she is committing that sin defiantly and from a posture of complete and total rejection of the covenant Lord himself. In short, it is the intentional sin of an apostate that is in view” (“Num 15:30-

contradiction between Numbers 15 and other passages and no need to harmonize by stretching or shrinking categories because there are three basic categories of sins:¹⁵

inadvertent: expiable
non-defiant deliberate: expiable
“high-handed” = defiant: inexpiable

Therefore Numbers 15:22-31 sets up a sharp contrast between the least serious category of inadvertent sins (vv. 22-29), which can never be defiant because the sinner is unaware that he is violating a divine command (cf. Lev 4:13-14, 22-23, 27-28),¹⁶ and the most serious category of defiant sins (Num 15:30-31), the unique presentation of which appears to be the main thrust of the legislation in Numbers.¹⁷ Although death of a defiant sinner may expiate for the community by purging the offender from it (cf. 25:13), defiance and the privilege of sacrificial expiation for the sinner’s benefit are mutually exclusive.¹⁸ This is illustrated by the wood-gatherer’s ineligibility for expiation (vv. 32-36).¹⁹ The contrastive and illustrative literary strategy in Numbers 15 conveys a potent

31 as Backdrop to Heb 10:26,” 6). Compare the rebellious posture of a hand upraised against one’s overlord in the Akkadian letter YOS 3.25: “Why in the world did you lift your hand against the king...?” (transl. A. Leo Oppenheim, *Letters from Mesopotamia* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967], 190).

¹⁵Gane, *Cult and Character*, 210-13; idem, “Numbers 15:22-31 and the Spectrum of Moral Faults,” 154-5.

¹⁶Inadvertence automatically rules out the possibility of *mens rea*, an unlawful state of mind on the part of the offender, which could accompany the *actus reus*, the unlawful act (cf. “Criminal Law and Procedure,” 4-5, legal summary in *WestWeek West Bar Review* (Washington, D.C.: West Publishing, 1996), courtesy of Rita D. Giebel, Attorney at Law.

¹⁷Cf. Wenham, *Numbers*, 130-31; Philip Budd, *Numbers* (WBC 5; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), 173-4.; Gane, *Cult and Character*, 212.

¹⁸K. Koch, “Sühne und Sündenvergebung um die Wende von der exilischen zur nachexilischen Zeit,” *EvT* 26 (1966): 331-2. However, see Exod 34:7 (including rebellious sin [כָּרָה]) and the case of King Manasseh (2 Chron 33), where God can mercifully forgive rebellious sinners apart from the Israelite sacrificial system.

¹⁹He would have known that he was defying the Lord’s repeated commands against work on Sabbath (Exod 16:29; 20:10; 23:12; 31:13-16; 34:21; 35:2-3), although this narrative does not explicitly label his offense as a “high-handed” sin or state that he suffered “cutting off” (כָּרָה). Wenham, *Numbers*, 131; Olson, *The Death of the Old*, 167; idem, *Numbers*, 96; cf. Jay Sklar, who regards his fate as an illustration of “cutting off” (כָּרָה; *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* [Hebrew Bible Monographs 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005], 19).

warning against covenant disloyalty (cf. chaps. 13-14, 16-17) by highlighting its consequences.²⁰

Different Victims for Expiation of Communal Inadvertent Sin

Attempted resolutions to the problem that Numbers 15:24 calls for a whole burnt offering with a purification offering, rather than only a purification offering (Lev 4:14), are as follows:²¹

1. Ibn Ezra (on Num 15:27) thought the Numbers 15 ritual remedied only violation of performative (“Thou shalt...”) commandments,²² thereby complementing the Leviticus 4 procedure for sins against prohibitive commandments (“Thou shalt not...”; see v. 2). However, as Ramban noted (on Num 15:22), the language of verses 24 and 30 (cf. v. 29) refers to wrong action (עָשָׂה), not just failure to do what the law prescribed.²³
2. Rashi (on Num 15:22-24) and Ramban (on Num 15:22, 25) held that Numbers 15 requires a special ritual if communal sin has the effect of breaking “all these commandments,” implying both prohibitive and performative ones (v. 22). In their view, such a sin could only be idolatry. However, inadvertent idolatry by the community would be practically impossible.²⁴
3. Gary Anderson proposes that Numbers 15:22-26 may present a general rule governing purification offerings because special applications of this kind of sacrifice for the community prescribe goats rather than bulls (Lev 9, 16; Num 28-29), in agreement with

²⁰Roy Gane, “Numbers 15:22-31 and the Spectrum of Moral Faults,” 155-6; cf. idem, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 626; idem, *Cult and Character*, 212.

²¹See *ibid.*, 83-6.

²²These would include the laws of vv. 1-16, 17-21, 37-41.

²³So there is at least overlap between the scope of the Leviticus 4 and Numbers 15 rituals. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 402-3; idem, *Leviticus 1-16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 264-9; Davies, *Numbers*, 157.

²⁴Wenham, *Numbers*, 130. See the lengths to which Ramban (on Num 15:22) went to imagine scenarios of unwitting apostasy, such as a child who was taken captive and grew up unaware of his Jewish identity.

Numbers 15 rather than Leviticus 4:13-21.²⁵ However, Numbers 15 is less adequate than Leviticus 4 as a general rule because it does not say how the purification offering is to be performed; for the activity paradigm it depends on Leviticus.²⁶

4. Ariyeh Toeg regards the law in Numbers as an expansion, through interpolation, of the corresponding law in Leviticus.²⁷ Israel Knohl agrees that Numbers is later, but holds that the “language of the text in Numbers 15 deviates completely from the language in Leviticus 4...This is no exegetic insertion but rather a revised and renewed version with only a weak affinity to the original text!”²⁸ Knohl interprets the difference as due to Leviticus 4 belonging to the “Priestly Torah,” which avoids anthropomorphizing God, and Numbers 15 as a subsequent version of the ritual law by the “Holiness School.” The Holiness School is not averse to personalized, anthropomorphic expressions, which explains why the whole burnt offering, which provides an aroma for God, is given priority before the purification offering in Numbers 15:24-25.²⁹

²⁵Anderson, “Interpretation of the Purification Offering,” 19-24, 32-34, in agreement with the *Temple Scroll*, but against rabbinic interpretation (e.g., *m. Hor.* 2:6).

²⁶Cf. Wenham, *Numbers*, 130. For other problems with Anderson’s view, see Gane, *Cult and Character*, 83-7.

²⁷Ariyeh Toeg, “Numbers 15:22-31—Midrash Halakha,” *Tarbiz* 43 (1974): 8-10 (Hebrew). Michael Fishbane accepts Toeg’s view that the Num 15 passage is an expansion based on Lev 4, but stresses the magnitude of the change in Num 15 (*Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985], 193). Others who have regarded the Numbers 15 law as presupposing that of Lev 4 include Diether Kellermann, “Bemerkungen zum Sündopfergesetz in Num 15,22ff.,” *Wort und Geschichte: Festschrift für Karl Elliger zum 70. Geburtstag* (AOAT 18; Kevelaer/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker/Neukirchener, 1973), 107-13; Wenham, *Numbers*, 130-31—“It seems simplest to suppose that the Leviticus rule is being modified slightly, as occurs with some other pentateuchal laws (cf. Ex. 13:2 and Nu. 3:12f.; Lv. 7:34 and Dt. 18:3; Lv. 11:39f. and Dt. 14:21).” Timothy Ashley agrees, adding comparisons between Num 2:17 and 10:17, and between Lev 27:30-33; Num 18:21-32 and Deut 14:22-29 to illustrate modification and supplementation of laws over time (*The Book of Numbers* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 285-6 [incl. n. 10]).

²⁸Israel Knohl, “The Sin Offering Law in the ‘Holiness School’ [Numbers 15.22-31],” *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* (Gary Anderson and Saul Olyan, eds.; JSOTSup 125; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 195.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 195-203; cf. *idem*, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 53, 171-2. Dennis Cole suggests that listing the burnt offering first here may be to emphasize its accompanying grain and wine offerings (*Numbers* [NAC 3B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000], 251).

5. I too have suggested the diachronic priority of Leviticus 4, but have wondered if the reason for distancing the ritual for the community from the procedure for the high priest (cf. Lev 4:3-12) could lie in the narrative context of Numbers, where communal sins include conflict with the high priesthood.³⁰

6. Jacob Milgrom adds the option that Leviticus 4 and Numbers 15:22-31 simply represent two independent traditions of expiation for the community.³¹ However, there are striking similarities between the passages: Each requires sacrificial expiation, involving a purification offering and a bull as victim, for an inadvertent offense of the community. Furthermore, as Milgrom has observed, the wording of Numbers 15:28 (“The priest shall make expiation...for him that he may be forgiven”) “is an exact citation of Leviticus 4:31b, except for one change in the word order.”³²

It is illuminating to pursue some threads of data that scholars have noticed. For one thing, inclusion of a burnt offering for the community brings grain and wine accompaniments with it (Num 15:24), in accordance with the rules in Numbers 15:1-16.³³ This contributes to literary unity within the chapter.³⁴ But it does more. The accompanying offerings are grown in Canaan. So the law of expiation for the community is linked to the promise of life in the land: Even if the Israelites make a mistake, if their sin is inadvertent, their life with God can continue. This augments the contrast with

³⁰Gane, *Cult and Character*, 85-6; idem, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 621.

³¹Milgrom, *Numbers*, 404-5. Davies suggests the possibility of a complex literary relationship between the two passages, with borrowing in more than one direction (Davies, *Numbers*, 156-7), but Milgrom has abandoned the quest for literary dependency.

³²Milgrom, *Numbers*, 124.

³³E.g., W. H. Bellinger, *Leviticus and Numbers* (NIBC 3; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001), 236.

³⁴Olson, *Numbers*, 94-5.

“high-handed” sin (vv. 30-31), resulting in the divine penalty of “cutting off” (כרת), which means that the sinner would forfeit life in the Promised Land.³⁵

In Numbers 15, communal expiation now covers aliens (v. 26), who could enjoy the land even though unfaithful Israelites would not.³⁶ Foreigners journeying with the Israelites (cf. Exod 12:38) had played a negative role as a catalyst for communal complaining (Num 11:4). But they could receive mercy too, provided that their sins were only inadvertent. Expanding the scope of communal expiation by inclusion of aliens requires an expanded ritual: a burnt offering as well as a purification offering.

In a number of texts referring to combination of burnt and purification offerings, the purification offering is actually performed first, as indicated by the verb עשה, “do/perform” (Lev 5:7-10; 9:7-14; 15:14-15, 29-30; Num 6:10-11; 8:12).³⁷ Such a pair serves as the functional equivalent of a single purification offering (obvious in Lev 5:7-10).³⁸ However, while Numbers 15 includes עשה, the burnt offering is first (v. 24).³⁹

Apparently unable to accept that a burnt offering could actually be performed before a

³⁵On “cutting off” see, e.g., Donald Wold, “The Meaning of the Biblical Penalty *Kareth*” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1978), 251-5; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 457-60; B. Schwartz, “The Bearing of Sin in the Priestly Literature,” in D. P. Wright, D. N. Freedman, and A. Hurvitz, eds., *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 13.

³⁶Cf. Bellinger, *Leviticus and Numbers*, 236.

³⁷Cf. Num 6:16, in which the performance/procedural order reverses the administrative order in v. 14, where the burnt offering is listed first (cf. Lev 12:6, 8). On such differences in ritual order, see Anson Rainey, “The Order of Sacrifices in Old Testament Ritual Texts,” *Bib* 51 (1970): 485-98.

³⁸In such cases the burnt offering supplements the quantity of expiation, apparently without adding distinct qualitative efficacy (Rolf Rendtorff, *Leviticus* [BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1985-1992], 3:177; Baruch Levine, *Leviticus* [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 29; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 304; Roy Gane, *Ritual Dynamic Structure* [Gorgias Dissertations 14, Religion 2; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004], 151-2; idem, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 122; idem, *Cult and Character*, 84-5. If this dynamic operates in Numbers 15, as I previously thought it did (Gane, *Ritual Dynamic Structure*, 151-2; idem, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 122; idem, *Cult and Character*, 84-5), a purification offering goat and burnt offering bull in Numbers 15 would simply provide a greater quantity of purification offering expiation than the purification offering bull in Leviticus 4.

³⁹Milgrom, *Numbers*, 403-4. Rainey regarded the order in Num 15:24-25 as administrative, missing the implication of עשה (“Order of Sacrifices,” 491).

purification offering in such a case, Milgrom turns to diachronic literary reconstructions that do not convince him: Perhaps a purification offering (of a bull, as in Lev 4) and עֲשֶׂה were earlier in the text, and the burnt offering and its accompaniments were later added before the purification offering. Alternatively, perhaps the burnt offering was original and the purification offering was added later.⁴⁰

Before dismissing the possibility that the burnt offering could actually be performed first, as Rashi (on Num 15:24) says it is, we should ask if this order occurs anywhere else.⁴¹ The calendar of sacrifices in Numbers 28-29 consistently has performance (with עֲשֶׂה) of several burnt offerings (with accompaniments) followed by a purification offering of a male goat.⁴² So it is not so surprising that in chapter 15 a burnt offering (but here only one) could be performed before a purification offering.

Why would expiation for communal inadvertent offenses in chapter 15 follow the order found in the cultic calendar, rather than that of other purification offerings remedying specific inadvertent sins?⁴³ Within the narrative context of Numbers, the

⁴⁰Milgrom, *Numbers* 404-5, following Rolf Rendtorff, *Studien zur Geschichte des Opfers im alten Israel* (WMANT 24; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1967), 22-23, 81-83. Neither do these reconstructions of Numbers 15 convince Knohl. He responds: “The fluent and uniform style of the passage and the fine linguistic distinctions in the descriptions of the various sacrifices witness, in my opinion, to a single literary unit that is influenced by both popular and Priestly cultic traditions and seeks to harmonize them” (Knohl, *Sanctuary of Silence*, 172 n. 20).

⁴¹Rashi referred to this unusual order, which he saw as unique among purification-burnt offering pairs and correlated with lack of the ם in טָהַר, “purification offering,” as support for his view concerning the unique scope of the ritual complex: to remedy sins involving idolatry.

⁴²Contra Gane, *Ritual Dynamic Structure*, 295, where I held that these purification offerings were actually performed before the burnt offerings. Note that עֲשֶׂה is a unifying element in Num 15 (vv. 3, 5, 6, 8, 11-14, 22, 24, 29, 30, 34, 38-40), as noted by Cole (*Numbers*, 243), and also in chaps. 28-29 (vv. 4, 6, 8, 15, 18, 20, 21, 23-26, 31; 29:1, 2, 7, 12, 35, 39). Ritual complexes for the community at new moons and annual festivals are in addition to, and therefore follow, the regular morning burnt offerings (28:15, 23, 24, 31; 29:6, 11, 16, 19, etc.; Gane, *Ritual Dynamic Structure*, 288; cf. *m. Zebahim* 10:1). After a regular burnt offering, the first sacrifice of every day, it makes sense to continue with additional burnt offerings, which supplement it, before performance of a purification offering.

⁴³Milgrom recognizes similarity between Numbers 15:24 and combinations of burnt and purification offerings of male animals in Lev 9:3; 23:18-19; and Num 28-29 (*Numbers*, 405).

connection to chapters 28-29 could imply that just as the community needs expiation on a particular occasion of inadvertent sin (chap. 15), so it will need expiation several times a year for the indefinite future (chaps. 28-29).⁴⁴

Burnt offerings expiate (Lev 1:4; 14:20; 16:24), and the idea that a burnt offering performed first carries distinct expiatory significance is suggested by appearance of the burnt offering (called *אֲשֶׁלָּה*, “food gift,” so-called “offering by fire”) in the explanation added to the efficacy formula (*וְנִסְלַח לָהֶם ... וְכִפֶּר הַכֹּהֵן*, “Thus the priest shall expiate...and they will be forgiven”) in Numbers 15:25.⁴⁵ As the original expiatory sacrifice (see, e.g., Job 1:5; 42:7-9),⁴⁶ the burnt offering presumably would continue to expiate for non-defiant sins outside the scope of purification and reparation offerings.⁴⁷ So it appears that the scope of expiation for the community (but not necessarily the individual) in Numbers 15, and also in 28-29, could include more than the inadvertent violations covered in Leviticus 4 (see v. 2).⁴⁸

There is another passage in which burnt offerings are performed (*עֲשֶׂה*) before a purification offering: Leviticus 23:18-19, in another calendar of sacred times. Here burnt offerings and a purification offering of a male goat, followed by a well-being offering (of two sheep), accompany two loaves of bread. Strikingly, the order of bread plus burnt and

⁴⁴Levine notes that the modified structure of burnt + purification offering resembles procedures in public festivals (Num 28-29) and explains: “A certain degree of blending is to be assumed, whereby combinations characteristic of the public cult were superimposed on the expiatory process, when it concerned communal atonement and, in that sense, represented public worship” (*Numbers 1-20*, 396).

⁴⁵Addition to the efficacy formula is continued into v. 26, where forgiveness is reiterated. Contrast the simpler conclusions in passages dealing with purification + burnt offering pairs (Lev 5:10; 9:7; 15:15, 30; Num 6:11; 8:12). In Lev 14:19-20 a burnt offering following a purification offering is assigned separate expiatory significance (repeating the *pi ‘el* of *כִּפֶּר*). But here these sacrifices are not paired; rather, they come at the end of a series of sacrifices beginning with a reparation offering (*אָשָׁם*; vv. 12-18).

⁴⁶Cf. Rendtorff, *Studien zur Geschichte*, 82-83.

⁴⁷Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 175-6, 858.

⁴⁸Although in Num 28-29 explicit references to expiation only follow mention of additional purification offerings (28:22, 30; 29:5).

purification offerings matches the sequence in Numbers 15:17-26, where the first bread dough and sacrifices for inadvertent sins are treated in the same divine speech.⁴⁹

Verses 18-19 of Leviticus 23 belong to the divine speech (vv. 9-22) that instructs regarding the elevated sheaf and the Festival of Weeks, which celebrate harvest in the spring. The introduction to the speech, which includes the words, “When you enter the land that I am giving to you” (v. 10), is almost the same as the introduction to Numbers 15 (v. 2). This is only the beginning of similarities between the divine speech in Leviticus 23 and all of Numbers 15:

Leviticus 23:9-22		Numbers 15	
verse 10	כִּי־תבאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם “When you enter the land that I am giving to you”	verse 2 (cf. 18)	כִּי תבאוּ אֶל־אֶרֶץ...אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם “When you enter the land...that I am giving to you”
11,15, 21	כָּל־מְלָאכֶת, “the S/sabbath”; הַשַּׁבָּת, “on the Sabbath day” עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ, “you shall not do any occupational work”	32	בַּיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת, “on the Sabbath day” אִישׁ יִגְדֹּף עֵץ
12-13, 18	מִנְחָה, “grain offering,” and נֶסֶךְ, “libation” (of יַיִן, “wine”) with עֹלָה, “whole burnt offering”	3-16	מִנְחָה, “grain offering,” and נֶסֶךְ, “libation” (of יַיִן, “wine”) with עֹלָה, “whole burnt offering”
14, 17, 21	מִוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם, “dwelling places”	2	מִוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם, “dwelling places”
14, 21	חֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם, “a permanent statute for your generations”	15 (cf. 14, 21, 23, 38)	חֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם, “a permanent statute for your generations”
17-18	לֶחֶם, “bread,” as first processed gift to God	19, 20-21	לֶחֶם הָאָרֶץ, “bread of the land”; loaf from dough as first processed gift to God
18 (cf. 13)	אִשָּׁה רִיחַ־נִיחָח לַיהוָה, “a food gift of soothing aroma for the LORD”	10, 13, 14 (cf. 2, 7, 25)	אִשָּׁה רִיחַ־נִיחָח לַיהוָה, “a food gift of soothing aroma for the LORD”
18-19	עֹלָה, “whole burnt offering(s),” with accompaniments, and שְׂעִיר־עִזִּים, “and one male goat as a purification offering”	24-25	עֹלָה, “whole burnt offering,” with accompaniments, and שְׂעִיר־עִזִּים, “and one male goat as a purification offering”

⁴⁹Milgrom notes regarding Num 15:22-31: “The lack of an introductory phrase, as in verses 1 and 17, indicates that this section was intended to be a continuation of the previous one” (*Numbers*, 122).

19	זָבַח sacrifice	3, 5, 8	זָבַח sacrifice
22	גֵר, “resident alien”	14-16, 29, 30	גֵר, “resident alien”
22	אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם “I am the LORD your God”	41	אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם “I am the LORD your God” (2x)

This cluster of similarities is too extensive to be coincidental, so there seems to be an intentional relationship between the passages.⁵⁰ However, there are also differences:

1. Sacrifices and first-processed offerings in the Promised Land are in the context of calendric festival occasions in Leviticus, but not in Numbers.
2. Only Numbers focuses on cases of sin that require sacrificial expiation or are too serious for it.
3. Only Numbers describes a case of Sabbath violation.
4. Resident aliens in Leviticus are classed with the poor and need assistance, but in Numbers they are accountable to the law along with Israelite citizens.
5. Only Numbers symbolizes the Lord’s relationship to the Israelites with tassels on garments.

It appears that Numbers takes a passage in Leviticus regarding joyful celebration of life in the Promised Land and reworks it into a much darker picture: Israel would enjoy the land under divine lordship, but loyalty to God, the need for expiation for nondefiant sins, and elimination of defiant sinners from the community would be major issues for Israelites and resident aliens alike. These changes in Numbers 15, which are placed at a transitional point in the record of Israelite history following exclusion of the adult

⁵⁰Israel Knohl regards both as products of the “Holiness School” (*Sanctuary of Silence*, 9-13, 23, 53, 90, 105, 171-2).

generation from the land, respond to disloyalty and rebellion by the larger Israelite community, including aliens, in chapters 11-14.

Numbers 15 exemplifies a common literary pattern observed by Nanette Stahl: Law appears at a transitional or liminal point in pentateuchal narrative, when an auspicious beginning has faded into a disappointing ending and there is a new beginning.⁵¹

These legal pronouncements serve not just as a source of stability and order in an imperfect, chaotic world. Biblical liminal moments are inherently flawed; the associated legal inserts reflect and resonate with the ambiguity of the narratives themselves. For example, the laws given to Noah after the flood, which include the prohibition against murder (Gen. 9.1-17), inaugurate a new era in human history; yet they are presented in a way that holds out little hope that the future will be much different from the past. Rather, these laws are articulated against a narrative background that acknowledges that ‘the devisings of man’s mind are evil from his youth’ (8.21) and are highly pessimistic about the possibility of changing this human propensity. The laws echo the destabilizing themes implicit in the narrative and work to further undermine the message of healing and renewal at the very moment it is articulated.⁵²

Offerers Limited to Community and Individual

Now we are ready for the third problem: Leviticus 4 has purification offerings for the high priest, the assembly, a chieftain, and any other individual Israelite. Numbers 15:22-29, however, only provides for expiation of the community and an individual commoner.⁵³ Having expanded the sacrifice of the community, at least partly to include non-Israelites (vv. 22-26), Numbers 15 then shows that expiation for inadvertent sin committed by an individual alien is the same as the existing procedure for an individual

⁵¹Nanette, Stahl, *Law and Liminality in the Bible* (JSOTSup 202; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 12-14. By comparison with repetition of the festival laws in Exod 34 after the golden calf episode, which “transmits a hopeful—if sobered—vision of the ongoing covenantal relationship,” Stahl mentions that the “legal material in Num. 15, Dennis Olson notes, also inserts a conciliatory and hopeful note into the text, in that instance following the account of the colossal failure of Moses’ spies to fulfill their mission” (69, n. 33; citing Olson, *Death of the Old*, 171-3). However, Stahl does not analyze Numbers 15.

⁵²Stahl, 14; cf. 15-17.

⁵³Milgrom has no real answer for this difference: “It might be suggested that Numbers 15 has no interest in the cases of the High Priest (Lev. 4:1-12) or of the chieftain (*nasi*) (Lev. 4:22-26)” (*Numbers*, 404).

common Israelite (vv. 27-29; cf. Lev 4:27-31). Another reason to include expiation for the individual is to contrast it with lack of expiation for the individual “high-handed” sinner (Num 15:30-31) and the wood-gatherer (vv. 32-36).⁵⁴ There is no need to reiterate purification offerings for other kinds of offerers, which would obviously remain the same because high priests and chieftains would not include aliens.⁵⁵

Conclusion

The present paper argues that differences between Numbers 15 and Leviticus reflect emphasis on themes that unify Numbers 15. In other words, answering one set of problems is part of the key to the other set.

Placement of Numbers 15 and its materials is not arbitrary, but contributes to the thematic flow of the book. This chapter is like the calm “eye” of a hurricane between the rebellion attending return of the scouts (chaps 13-14) and the mutiny of Korah & Co. and its aftermath (chaps. 16-17).⁵⁶ It encourages covenant loyalty on the part of the entire community, including aliens, by promising life under the Lord in Canaan (cf. v. 41), where they would offer produce of the land to him along with animal sacrifices (vv. 1-29), and by instructing them to wear reminders of the need to remain loyal (vv. 37-41). Inside this positive framework is a stern warning against disloyalty manifested by defiant sin (vv. 30-31, 32-36).⁵⁷

In terms of the contrast between loyalty and disloyalty, the structure of Numbers 15 as a whole can be outlined as follows:

⁵⁴It is true that a high-handed sinner could be a high priest or chieftain, but such a case is not envisioned in Numbers 15.

⁵⁵Another apparent abbreviation is omission of a sheep as an optional victim for the commoner (cf. Lev 4:32; 5:6).

⁵⁶Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 619; Bellinger, *Leviticus and Numbers*, 237-8.

⁵⁷On the centrality of loyalty in the context of Israel’s expiatory system, see Gane, *Cult and Character*, 305-23.

Loyalty: sacrificial accompaniments (vv. 1-16)
Loyalty: first dough (vv. 17-21)
Loyalty: purification offerings for inadvertent offenses (vv. 22-29)
 Disloyalty: “high-handed” sin (vv. 30-31)
 Disloyalty: wood-gatherer (vv. 32-36)
Loyalty: tassels (vv. 37-41)

Whenever the laws of Numbers 15 were actually given and the episode of the wood-gatherer actually occurred, and whenever these pericopes were placed in their present position, their presentation here influences hearer/reader response to the next rebellion in chapters 16-17. Korah & Co., who belonged to the older generation and did not share the promise of hope for life in the land, rebelled in spite of encouragement to loyalty and clear warning against disloyalty.⁵⁸ Knowing that rebellion was inexpiable, they consciously burned their bridges behind them. This strongly implies that God is justified in destroying such people and their sympathizers (Num 16:30-33, 35, 44-49 [Engl. 17:9-14]). Therefore, Numbers 15 contributes to a message of theodicy.⁵⁹

⁵⁸Cf. Novick, “Law and Loss,” 4-8, regarding the hopeless attitude of the wood-gatherer, who may have thought that God’s law no longer applied to him.

⁵⁹Cf. Dennis Olson, *Death of the Old*, 173-4; idem, *Numbers*, 100; Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 619.