CHAPTER SIX

COVENANTAL PROVISIONS
FOR FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

INTRODUCTION

Whenever an Israelite committed some Levitical or Deuteronomical offense, an obstacle was placed between himself and the Lord, on the one hand, and himself and the community, on the other. Whether he stole property belonging to a fellow Israelite, broke the Sabbath regulations, or unknowingly walked over a grave, he was in disfavor with the Almighty and needed some means by which he could find remission and reconciliation. There were specified ways for dealing with each situation. Objects that had been defiled could be broken, burned, or washed, depending on the object. Persons who had sinned or defiled themselves could either be atoned by the priest, cleansed by bathing, or both, depending on the act. This chapter will consider first repeated cleansings from various types of ritual impurity, second, special baptisms related to initiation and cleansings from defilement at birth, and third, the conditions whereby sin could be forgiven on the Day of Atonement.

RITUAL CLEANSINGS

Objects and persons.—Meat from peace offerings and thanksgiving offerings had to be eaten on the days immediately after they were offered. After the first day, thanksgiving offerings had to be burned with fire. After two days the peace offering was considered impure (יָשַׁב), and was also required to be burned. Any meat that touched anything unclean (נָטַע) was burned, and any person who ate of peace offerings while he was defiled was “cut off” from his people. Also the Israelites who ate meat from animals not properly slaughtered were “cut off” from the community. This is somewhat like lepers who were made to leave camp until they were

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1 Lev. 7:15-18; 19:6-8.
2 Lev. 7:19.
3 Lev. 7:19-21.
4 Lev. 7:22-27.
5 Lev. 13:46.
pronounced clean by the priest, except for these offenses no provision was made to restore those who were "cut off" to the community. Garments could be cleansed from defilement by washing,¹ as was true of objects of wood or skin, any sack or vessel. They were washed or put in water as soon as they became defiled and they remained unclean until evening. An earthen vessel that became defiled was broken.² After battle, all objects of metal or other material that could stand fire were passed through fire. Goods that would burn were purified with sprinkling water.³ Garments that were leprous were washed under certain conditions, but under more extreme cases they were burned.⁴ When a house was leprous,⁵ the priest commanded that the stones be removed and put in an unclean place, the plaster scraped off, new stones replaced, and the house replastered. If the "disease" continued, the house was broken down, and its parts carried to an unclean place.⁶ The priest determined whether or not any person or object was leprous. He also supervised the cleansing which involved the proper sacrifices as well as the methods listed above. The land was cleansed by the

¹ Ex. 19:10, 14; Lev. 11:32; 15:16, 21-22, 27.
² Lev. 11:33-35; 15:12.
³ Num. 31:21-23.
⁴ Lev. 13:47-59. It is interesting to note that John baptized with water and promised that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Mt. 3:11). In the prayer for mourners for Zion, the worshipper affirmed, "For you, O Lord, destroyed it [the temple] with fire. With fire you will rebuild it." (Singer, 59-60). According to Büchler, "The Levitical Impurity of the Gentile," JQR, n.s. 17 (1926-27), 48, fn. 139, Samaritans purified the ground on which Christians and Jews walked—with fire. Bagatti, L'Eglise de la Circumcision, tr. A. Storme (Jerusalem, 1965), 197, thinks baptism with fire referred to branding a cross permanently on the foreheads of Christians with a hot iron. The context of baptism with water as over against baptism with fire seems to be analogous to the Levitical cleansing of objects taken as booty in war. Those that could stand fire were made to pass through fire; those that could not were baptized in water. Amos (1:7, 10, 11, 14; 2:2, 5) used the figure "fire" to mean war.

The idea that John's (and therefore Christian) baptism differed from sectarian baptism because it was a "once for all" baptism in contrast to sectarian repeated washings continues to be affirmed with no new evidence for its support. One recent advocate is J. Pryke, "Baptism and Communion in the Light of Qumran," RQ 5 (1966), 546. Some Christians, at least, were expected to continue practicing ablutions after the "once for all" Christian initiation, whereas various Jewish sects that continued to use ablutions also probably used only one "once for all" baptism for initiation of new members.

⁵ Which probably meant "mouldy."