

“A son of the herd” and “a daughter of its year”: On Specifications for Sacrificial Animals

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Abstract

There are a number of more or less closely related problems when it comes to translating the specifications for sacrificial animals.

I put together the basic requirements for sacrificial animals from Leviticus 1–5, for ease of reference.

I then discuss the frequent phrase *par ben-bāqār* ‘bull, son-of-cattle’. This includes an investigation on what *bēn* ‘son’ means when it stands in combination with animals’ names. The main question is whether it expresses the age or the species. This also affects texts that talk of pigeons as sacrifices.

The widely held view that a *par* is a “young bull”, together with the frequently found condition that a lamb should be “one year old”, leads to the question, how the age of an animal influences its value as a sacrifice. I collect the views of several scholars on this topic and discuss the logic behind the demand for “one year old” animals. For this, I also had informal talks with people who have some background in animal husbandry.

Lastly, I turn to ambiguous places in the book of Numbers and apply the findings to them.

The results will help translators to understand the texts better for themselves, and to be more confident in choosing terms and in rendering redundant or ambiguous wordings.

Glossary of English terms for animals

bull	adult male cattle
bullock	young bull; (also used of castrated bulls / steers, but not in the present paper)
calf	young cattle of either sex (usually under one year)
cattle	plural noun for any cow-like animal, regardless of sex or age; singular: a head of cattle
cow	usually: female cattle; sometimes: any cattle
ewe	a female sheep
herd	a number of animals kept together; in traditional versions referring to cattle – in contrast to <i>flock</i> , which refers to sheep & goats.
heifer	a young cow over one year old that has not given birth to a calf
yearling	an animal in its second year

1. Introduction

One reason for getting started on this article were places where the kind of animal is under-specified, which makes the right word choice difficult. For example, NASB translates *kebeś* in Num 7:15 with “male lamb”, but in 1Chr 29:21 with “lamb”. As translators, we need to know: is “male lamb” more specific than it should be, or is “lamb” missing a detail that should be included?

Another major question concerns the phrase *par ben-bāqār* ‘bull, son-of-cattle’. It occurs over 30 times. Does it mean a ‘bull’, or a ‘young bull’, and is ‘son-of-cattle’ a superfluous addition or not? The answers directly affect translation.

Further, in Lev 1:14, the English versions are divided between saying “young pigeon” or just “pigeon”. What is the reason behind this?

The specification that an animal should be “one year old” occurs about 50 times. What is this really about? Should it be *exactly* one year old? Or should it not be *older*? Or not be *younger*? If we as translators do not understand the point behind it, we will not communicate it clearly either. Even such a simple phrase as “one year old” could be misunderstood.

Naturally, these questions are most relevant in the Pentateuch, but they come up elsewhere as well.

On some of the issues, the standard resources are either silent, or provide too little data, or do not substantiate their claims well. We will therefore need to do our own analysis.

My hope is that this article helps to see the reasons behind the differences in English versions, and to enable translators to come to justified decisions in their own work.

2. Specifications for certain kinds of offerings

What follows are some key verses about animals that are acceptable for sacrifices. Most of these conditions are found in Leviticus 1–5. I quote them here for convenient reference. (The text from NASB is rendered here without its footnotes, but with some of the Hebrew terms included.)

2.1. Burnt offerings

Lev 1 says:

² ... ‘When any man of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of animals from the herd or the flock. ³ If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer it, a male [זָכָר] without defect; ... ⁵ He shall slay the young bull [בֶּן־הַבָּקָר] before the LORD; ... ¹⁰ ‘But if his offering is from the flock [צֹאן], of the sheep [כֶּשֶׂבִּים] or of the goats [עֵזִים], for a burnt offering, he shall offer it a male [זָכָר] without defect. ... ¹⁴ ‘But if his offering to the Lord is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering from the turtledoves [הַתְּרִיִּים] or from young pigeons [בְּנֵי־הַיֹּנֵה].

Wenham (1979) confirms (on vv. 3-17):

As a rule the sacrificial victim had to be a perfect male specimen, though this is not insisted on with birds. For official services one-year-old male lambs were the commonest victim, though on some occasions rams or young bulls were preferred (Num. 28-29).

Lev 1 is not specific about the age of the animals.

2.2. Peace offerings

As Lev 3:1/6/7/12 state, a peace offering could be from the cattle, or a sheep or a goat. The sex does not matter.

¹ ‘Now if his offering is a sacrifice of peace offerings, if he is going to offer out of the herd, whether male or female, ...

⁶ But if his offering for a sacrifice of peace offerings to the LORD is from the flock, he shall offer it, male or female, without defect.

⁷ If he is going to offer a lamb ...

¹² ‘Moreover, if his offering is a goat, ...

One lesson to learn from the specifications above is that **burnt offerings require male animals, whereas peace offerings do not**.

2.3. Sin offerings (or: purification offerings)

Which animal is to be presented depends on *who* is guilty. Lev 4 says:

³ if the anointed priest sins so as to bring guilt on the people, then let him offer to the LORD a bull [בֶּן־בָּקָר] without defect ...

¹³ ‘Now if the whole congregation of Israel commits error ... ¹⁴ ..., then the assembly shall offer a bull of the herd [בֶּן־בָּקָר] ...

²² ‘When a leader sins ... ²³ ... he shall bring for his offering a goat, a male [שְׂעִיר זָכָר] without defect. ...

²⁷ ‘Now if anyone of the common people sins ... ²⁸ ..., then he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female [שְׂעִירַת עִזִּים נְקִיבָה] without defect, ...

Chapter 5 sets forth further regulations for special circumstances, involving female sheep. Whereas Lev 4 is silent about the age of the animals, Num 15:27 specifies that the female goat for an individual's offering is to be "a year old". Wenham notes (on Lev 4, under the heading "The Sacrificial Animals"):

It is notable that the male lamb or ram, the most common animal in burnt offerings, is never used for the purification offering (though female lambs were), while goats, the standard animal for the purification offering, were not used for the regular burnt offerings.

2.4. Guilt offerings (*or*: reparation offerings)

According to Lev 5:15, a guilt offering required "a ram [אֵילָם] without defect from the flock" (see also vv. 18/25).

Now that we have taken note of these fundamental requirements, let us take up some difficulties.

3. The phrase בֶּן־בָּקָר פַּר *par ben-bāqār* 'bull, son-of-cattle'

One of the verses quoted above (Lev 4:3) contains the phrase בֶּן־בָּקָר פַּר *par ben-bāqār*. This expression occurs 33 times.¹ Literally, it can be glossed 'bull, son-of-cattle'. But how do the two elements 'bull' and 'son-of-cattle' complement each other? What exactly does each of them contribute to the meaning? Is the second one redundant? We first take a closer look at *par*.

3.1. What is a פַּר *par*?

The *Handbook* (1999) on Ex 29:1 puts it this way:

The word for **young bull** (*par*) is not the same as that used for "ox" (*shor*), which is a more generic Hebrew term for a fully grown bovine, or head of cattle (see 21.28.) The *par*, though young, was already a mature animal.

The *Animals Handbook* (2005) elaborates (§ 2.10 Cattle, cow, ox, bull, p. 35):

Par refers specifically to young bulls reserved for sacrifice. Some commentators deduce that these are firstborn bulls; others believe that the bulls were especially fattened. ... It is likely that both positions are correct. The age of the sacrificial bull varied from one year to three years and older, so the translation "calf" is a little misleading. *Par* is best translated by a phrase meaning "sacrificial bull" the first time it appears in a paragraph, and then simply bull thereafter in the paragraph. ...

HALOT (1994–2000) states a number of important facts (s.v. פַּר):

... traditionally bullock (Gesenius-B.; KBL; Zorell *Lex.*) :: Péter loc. cit.: **bull, steer.**

—1. a. sometimes the animal is a young one ... — b. elsewhere it is an adult animal פַּר שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים Ju 6:25 ... —2. the predominant meaning of פַּר in the OT is a sacrificial animal. ...

We recognize that *par* denotes a bull. Typically it might have been a relatively young one, but the age is not so essential to the meaning that translating it as "young bull / bullock" is required.

Gen 32:15-16 [English 14-15] give a list of Jacob's present for his brother Esau.

Alongside goats, sheep, camels and donkeys the terms פָּרוֹת *pārôt* 'cows' and פָּרִים *pārîm* 'bulls' show up – with no indication at all that this would refer to young ones (cf. v. 6 [English 5] which uses the general word שׂוֹר *šôr*).

1Sam 6:7 uses the phrase פָּרוֹת עֹלֹת *pārôt 'ālôt* 'nursing cows'. From this follows that *pārôt* are, or at least can in principle be, mature animals. On the other hand, in this particular case it also says that they should be cows "on which there has never been a yoke". This would be more likely in young ones.

¹ This count includes cases with inserted numerals, as in 'bull, one, son-of-cattle' (Ex 29:1).

Further, where the age matters, the Law specifies it in years (see further below). Just using the word *par* to suggest an approximate age would not be precise.

We now turn to the second element in *par ben-bāqār*.

3.2. What does the phrase בֶּן־בָּקָר *ben-bāqār* ‘son-of-cattle’ tell us?

The question is what the phrase ... בֶּן־... ‘son-of-...’ specifies – both here in cattle, and in other animals:

- Is it the *species* of the animal – for example, son-of-cattle in contrast to son-of-sheep?
- Is it to indicate the *age* – namely in a combination like ‘son of a year’, or because ‘son’ indicates a young one?
- Or is it the *sex* – a ‘son’ at the exclusion of a ‘daughter’, i.e. a male, not a female animal?
- Does it serve to specify the *number* of animals – as in ‘one son of the herd’ (because *bāqār* by itself is a collective noun)?
- Or is it a combination, or neither of these factors?
- Or is the phrase redundant?

There is no short answer. The evidence is not univocal. To put it as simply as possible: **in animals, the ‘son-of’ phrase indicates a young one; but in sacrificial contexts it only means a “relatively young one”, and what plays the more important role is that it indicates or confirms the species of the animal.**

To begin with, I quote what the *Handbook* (1990) says on Lev 1:5:

The bull: literally “a son of the herd.” ... In expressions of this type the Hebrew word that usually means “son” or “child” expresses the idea of membership in a group. Compare the very frequent Old Testament expression “children of Israel,” which means simply “Israelites,” or the expression “son of a prophet,” indicating membership in a group of prophets ... The idea of youth (translated “young bull” in NIV) is not an essential component of the meaning here. What is important in this context is that a male animal of the category of larger animals must be sacrificed.

The present examination will lead us to make some qualifications to the first underlined statement above, but to agree with the second underlined statement.

Let us first take a look at HALOT (s.v. בָּר, 1. c. [not s.v. בֶּן!]):

בָּר בֶּן־בָּקָר ... does not indicate the age but the type of animal; according to Pétér VT 25 (1975) 492 the additional phrase בֶּן־בָּרִי־בָּקָר recalls an earlier usage when בָּר signified the male of any type of animal, as is evident in the meaning of the substantive in Syr. and Mnd., also in Arb.; ...

That *par* might have been used of other animals as well is a reasonable supposition. A comparable case would be “bull” in English: it refers primarily to a male head of cattle, but can also denote a male elephant etc. The view presented in HALOT that the ‘son-of’ phrase is needed to clarify the *type* of animal is, then, a good working hypothesis. However, we need to look at a wider range of data.

3.2.1. The concrete and the figurative sense of ‘son(s) of ...’ (בֶּן־... / בָּרִי־...) according to the dictionaries

A crucial question is **whether the Hebrew word for ‘son’ is used in the concrete sense of ‘offspring / young one’, or in the figurative sense of ‘individual / member of a group’.**

We first take a look at what some dictionaries have to say.

For בֶּן in the construct state, followed by an animal’s name in the genitive, HALOT and Gesenius / Donner (2013) provide references, but without discussion.

HALOT (s.v. בֶּן) gives the meaning “young animal” (under 1. b)). It does *not* mention animals under 4. (“with collectives **single, individual**”), or 5. (**member** of a nation, tribe), or 6. (**member, fellow** of a group, class guild”).

Gesenius / Donner (2013) (s.v. בֵּן) list “Junges” [*English: young animal*] (under 1. b)). Then (under 8. b)), it speaks of individuals, and includes animals as well, and gives as one example Lev 4:3 “ein Jungstier, ein einwandfreies Stück Vieh” (*English: a young bullock, a blameless head of cattle*). This shows that it is not always immediately clear whether the meaning ‘young one’ or the sense ‘one of its kind’ should be applied.

More helpful is NIDOTTE (1997) when it explains (s.v. בֵּן, vol. 1, p. 673):

bēn is sometimes used of animals to denote offspring [i.e., young ones, PS] or a category or species.

(a) *Offspring of animals*. The pl. *bānim* is used of the offspring of cows (1Sam 6:7), camels (Gen 32:16), birds (Deut 22:6), and an ass (Gen 49:11). Similarly, *ben bāqār* (Lev 4:3/14; Num 7:15/21; Ezek 43:19) does not refer merely to individual cattle, but in parallelism with *par* it most probably means “young bullock(s)” (cf. 1Sam 14:32: *bāqār ūb^{nē} bāqār*, cattle and sons of cattle, i.e., “cattle and young bullocks”). Similarly, Zech 9:9 specifies the he-ass as “on a colt, the foal of a donkey”; ... occasionally *bēn* may indicate the individual animal, as probably Gen 18:7.

(b) *Category or species of animals*. Sometimes *bēn* expresses the category rather than the individual offspring of animals. This is the case with *b^{nē} ‘izzīm*, sons of goats (2Chr 35:7), which, as the parallel *k^ābāsīm*, lambs, indicates, does not refer to the offspring of goats, but to the category of kids, possibly to the species of goats. This is probably the sense in Ps 114:4/6 (“lambs”), 147:9 (“young ravens”), and Prov 30:17 (“vultures”).

The entry shows that **the meaning ‘young ones’ is definitely right at least in some instances**. Let us quote two such places:²

Gen 32:16 [Engl.15]: thirty milking camels and their colts [בְּנֵי הַיָּמִים]

Deut 22:6 NRSV: If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings [אֵפְרָיִם] or eggs [בִּיצִים], with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young [הַבְּנִים].

With regard to 2Chr 35:7, we accept the possibility that the species of animals is in view. The following three references that are also quoted in NIDOTTE are not convincing:

- In Ps 114:4/6, in both verses rams are mentioned in the preceding line, so the species is already known. That *young ones* are mentioned specifically is most natural when the verse talks about their “skipping”.
- Ps 147:9 says:

... He gives to the beast its food, / And to the young ravens which cry.

 Since it speaks of their crying for food, it is most natural to think of young ones (cf. NJPS: “... who gives the beasts their food, / to the raven’s brood what they cry for.”).
- Pro 30:17 says:

The eye that mocks a father / And scorns a mother,

The ravens of the valley will pick it out, / And the young eagles will eat it.

 Although just saying “eagles” would still make sense, speaking of “young eagles” is easily explained as a variation in the parallelism, meaning indeed young ones – just like in the preceding cola the ravens do not need to be specified, but are, for poetic reasons, described as “of the valley”.

Another controversial example comes from Jer 31:12. It reads:

... And they will be radiant over the bounty of the Lord – / ... And over the young of the flock and the herd; ...

In Hebrew, the underlined phrase is בְּנֵי צֹאן וּבְנֵי בָקָר *b^{nē}-šō‘n ūbāqār* ‘sons-of-sheep and [of] cattle’. Here, *bēn* unlikely defines the species, because it refers to two species. – Unless one reads “sons-of-sheep, and [adult] cattle, which some seem to do. It results in the renderings “sheep and cattle” or “flocks and herds”, found in NJPS, GNT, CEV and NLT.

² Quotes are from NASB where nothing else is indicated. Underlining is mine.

But this understanding should be questioned. Neither Scalise (1995), nor Thompson (1997), nor Fischer (2005) take the Hebrew that way. They rather think of “the young of flock and herd”. Although the other reading is grammatically possible, the context speaks against it. It is about fertility. Fischer says explicitly that lambs and kids are in view, and sees a relation to sacrifices. Thus, Jer 31:12 is one more place where the meaning “young ones” is to be preferred.

3.2.2. The case of pigeons [הַיִּנְיָ]

Looking at the case of sacrificial pigeons confirms the meaning ‘young ones’ for *b^onê* as well. Lev 1:14 says:

But if his offering to the LORD is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering from the turtledoves or from young pigeons [הַיִּנְיָ הַיְּזוּרָה *b^onê hayyônâ*].

Now, the *Handbook* says:

Young pigeons: literally, “sons of pigeons.” As explained in verse 5, the words “sons of ...” do not necessarily refer to youth but to membership in a group. The addition of the word young in RSV is therefore not a good model to follow, nor is “a young pigeon” in NIV.

But this view is very difficult to defend. The first argument against it is that, if *בְּנֵי b^onê* ‘sons of ...’ was referring to members of a group only, then this should have been used of the turtledoves as well, not only of the pigeons.

Further, Milgrom (Leviticus, AB, 1991), in Lev 1:14, translates “a turtledove or a young pigeon” and explains (p. 168):

The word *b^onê* preceding “pigeon” can designate the members of a class, like *b^onê Yisrā’el* ‘Israelites’. By contrast, the term *yônâh* is found by itself without any modifier (Gen 8:8; Isa 60:8, etc.), which can only mean that *b^onê* here refers to the young (as clearly in 1Sa 6:7/10). The rabbis also hold to this distinction. The reason for it may be that pigeons are tough when old, whereas doves can be eaten at any age.

Another explanation would be their size. **Turtledoves are smaller** than pigeons. Therefore, *young* pigeons are a good enough alternative to meet the requirements for the offering.

On top of this, **Luke 2:24**, which explicitly quotes the law, says:

and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, “A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS.”

The Greek reads: ζεύγος τρυγόνων ἢ δύο ὑσσούς περιστερῶν. All versions say “young pigeons” here.

In summary, interpreting the ‘son-of’ phrase as indicating the species is a possibility to be taken into regard, **but it has sometimes been applied without good reasoning.** Often times we need to interpret the ‘son-of’ phrase with animals as ‘young ones’.

3.2.3. *ben-bāqār* as a young animal

Let us turn back to the phrase *בֶּן־בָּקָר ben-bāqār*. This phrase and its variants (בֶּן־הַבָּקָר / בְּנֵי־בָקָר) occur 40 times.³

In two occurrences, the meaning that we have seen above – where *בֶּן* indicates a young one – fits well: one of them is the very first occurrence of the phrase *בֶּן־בָּקָר* in Gen 18:7. The verse reads:

NRSV: Abraham ran to the herd [הַבָּקָר], and took a calf [בֶּן־בָּקָר], tender and good, ...

That the animal is taken from the “herd” (‘cattle’) is already said before the phrase *בֶּן־בָּקָר* is used. Thus the purpose of this phrase is not to specify the *kind* of animal. Rather, the *young age* is emphasized, and this view is supported by the adjectives that follow.

³ The references are: Gen 18:7/8; Ex 29:1; Lev 1:5; 4:3/14; 9:2; 16:3; 23:18; Num 7:15-81(12x); 8:8(2x); 15:8/9/24; 28:11/19/27; 29:2/8/13/17; 1Sam 14:32; 2Chr 13:9; Ezek 43:19/23/25; 45:18; 46:6.

The second case is similar. 1Sa 14:32 reads:

NRSV: so the troops flew upon the spoil, and took sheep and oxen [בָּקָר] and calves [בְּנֵי־בָקָר], and slaughtered them on the ground; ...

Since “oxen” (‘cattle’) have been mentioned already, the phrase ‘sons-of-cattle’ specifies that not only full-grown cattle were taken, but also young ones. – These instances, then, show that things are not as simple as they sound in HALOT’s entry (“פֶּר בֶּן־בָּקָר ... does not indicate the age but the type of animal”, see above under § 3.2.). But what HALOT says still holds true in many cases. We now come to those ones where the meaning ‘young ones’ does not fit well.

3.2.4. *ben-bāqār* indicating the species after all

Typically (33x), the phrase בֶּן־בָּקָר follows פֶּר, e.g. in Num 7:15 (repeated eleven times in this chapter, in the list of offerings of the tribal leaders):

פֶּר אֶחָד בֶּן־בָּקָר

Literally: one bull, son-of-cattle

One time, in Lev 9:2, a **calf** is mentioned:

... קַח־לְךָ עֵגֶל בֶּן־בָּקָר לְחַטָּאת ...

Literally: ... Take for yourself a calf, son-of-cattle, for a sin offering ...

Further above I quoted HALOT’s article on פֶּר, saying that “the additional phrase בֶּן־בָּקָר/בְּנֵי־בָּקָר recalls an earlier usage when פֶּר signified the male of any type of animal”. The same could be true of עֵגֶל ‘*egel*’ ‘calf’: because עֵגֶל could be used of other animals as well (as in English the word *calf* can also be used of a young elephant, for example), בֶּן־בָּקָר is needed for clarification.

Looking at the above two examples together, makes one wonder whether ‘son-of-cattle’ really informs us about the age, because a calf (Lev 9:2) is young by definition; adding ‘son-of-cattle’ seems redundant. And if it should still be taken as indicating young age, then, in the first verse (Num 7:15), it only indicates a **relatively young age**, because a פֶּר is older than an עֵגֶל.

The only places where בֶּן־בָּקָר is used by itself (not following פֶּר), are Gen 18:7-8 and 1Sam 14:32 (both quoted above), and the following two cases:

(1) Lev 1:5 says:

NRSV: The bull [בֶּן־הַבָּקָר] shall be slaughtered before the Lord ; ...

The kind of animal had been specified before in v. 3 as follows:

NRSV: If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd [בְּנֵי־הַבָּקָר], you shall offer a male without blemish.

Nothing is said about the age. Therefore, ‘son-of-cattle’ in v. 5 does not necessarily refer to a young bull. At least, that is not the point of interest. The phrase just refers to the kind of animal that was previously introduced. (As the instructions are spelled out, the speaker refers to the animal as a specific-indefinite one).

When we look at the division of the chapter, it is clear how v. 2 functions as a kind of heading, talking of two options:

... ‘When any man of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of animals from the herd or the flock.

Verses 3 and 10 take up these two options, and v. 14 adds a third one, namely birds. **Thus, the animal denoted as ‘from the cattle’ in v. 3 and as ‘son-of-cattle’ in v. 5 is in both cases distinguished from the ‘flock’ in vv. 10ff. and from the birds in vv. 14ff. In conclusion, here, the phrase בֶּן־בָּקָר speaks more about the species of animal than about its age.**

I repeat part of the *Handbook*’s comment on Lev 1:5:

The bull: literally “a son of the herd.” ... In expressions of this type the Hebrew word that usually means “son” or “child” expresses the idea of membership in a group. ... The idea of youth (translated “young bull” in NIV) is not an essential

component of the meaning here. What is important in this context is that a male animal of the category of larger animals must be sacrificed.

As the data that I presented earlier shows, the idea of “one of a certain kind” or “membership in a group” is to be applied with caution, but in this case it seems right.

Milgrom also translates “the bull” in this case and says:

benhabbāqār, lit., “a male bovine”, equivalent to *par* ‘bull’. The former term was chosen to be in keeping with the heading in v. 3.

(2) The other case – a similar one – is found in Num 15:8, for which see further below.

Looking back at the few cases where בֶּן־בָּקָר is used by itself, we find that the context helps to clarify the meaning: in Gen 18:7-8 and 1Sam 14:32 it contrasts with בָּקָר (adult cattle); in Lev 1:5 and Num 15:8 it contrasts with the flock.⁴

3.2.5. *par* as a short form for *par ben-bāqār*

A few times we find that *par* is enough to refer to what was identified before as *par ben-bāqār*. This is the case in Ex 29:1/3 and Lev 4:3/4.

Another example is found in Num 8, which reports about the dedication of the Levites. Verses 8 and 12 read:

⁸ Then let them take a bull [בֶּן־בָּקָר] with its grain offering, fine flour mixed with oil; and a second bull [בֶּן־שֵׁנִי] you shall take for a sin offering. ...

¹² Now the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the bulls [הַבָּקָרִים]; then offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering to the LORD, to make atonement for the Levites.

If *par* serves as an “abbreviation” for *par ben-bāqār* where that has been used before, we cannot simply conclude that both are the same. But we can suspect that *par* carries the main meaning, and *ben-bāqār* might not add anything essential to it.⁵

Another piece of evidence points into the same direction. The number word normally stands at the end of the noun phrase (e.g. Lev 23:18 בֶּן־בָּקָר אֶחָד *par ben-bāqār eḥād* ‘bull, son-of-cattle, one’), but the reverse is also found (e.g. Num 7:87 שְׁנַיִם עֶשְׂרִים פָּרִים שְׁנַיִם *šnēm ‘āsār pārim* ‘twelve bulls’). At times, **the number word is even inserted between the two elements of the noun phrase *par ben-bāqār*** (e.g. Ex 29:1 בֶּן־בָּקָר אֶחָד *par eḥād ben-bāqār* ‘bull, one, son-of-cattle’; and Num 8:8 (quoted above), where the first animal is called *par ben-bāqār*, the second one *par šēnī ben-bāqār* ‘bull, second, son-of-cattle’). This word order could be interpreted in the way that *ben-bāqār* was added out of habit, not because it was essential for defining the kind of animal.

3.2.6. The question reflected in the New Testament

Interesting is the variety which the author of Hebrews uses to refer to sacrificial animals: we find “goats and calves” (Heb 9:12), and, the other way round, “calves and goats” (9:19), but also “goats and bulls” (9:13), and, vice versa, “bulls and goats” (10:4). That “calf” (μόσχος) and “bull” (ταῦρος) are used interchangeably could reflect that Hebrew *par ben-bāqār* is open for both interpretations. Ellingworth (1993) says (on Heb 9:12): “The “young bullock” of Lv. 16:3 could be called either μόσχος or ταῦρος (Bruce).”

3.2.7. Other interpretations

Indicating the age?

⁴ A simple construct chain, without *ben* or *bat*, can be used, too, to indicate the species:

בָּקָר עֵגְלֹת *eglat bāqār* (Deut 21:3); פָּרֵי־הַשֹּׂר *par-haššōr* (Judg 6:25).

⁵ The reverse to the above usage does not happen: *ben-bāqār* is not used as a replacement for the full phrase *par ben-bāqār*. However, in Num 8:15ff., each leader brings *par eḥād ben-bāqār* ‘one bull, son-of-cattle’, and they are then totalled in verse 87 by saying that the number of בָּקָר כָּל־הַבָּקָר *kōl-habbāqār* ‘all the cattle’ was שְׁנַיִם עֶשְׂרִים פָּרִים *šnēm ‘āsār pārim* ‘twelve bulls’ (see below on Num 8:15).

There is no question that בֵּן *bēn* can be used to express the age. This applies both to human-beings (e.g. Gen 12:4, which says that Abram was “a son of 75 years” when he left Haran), and to animals (e.g. Num 7:15 כֶּבֶשׂ-אֶחָד בֶּן-שָׁנָתוֹ – ‘a lamb, one, a son-of-its-year’; Lev 14:10 כֶּבֶשֶׂה אֶחָת בַּת-שָׁנָתָהּ – ‘a ewe-lamb, one, a daughter-of-its-year’). But this is a distinct usage, in which *bēn* is followed by a number word. We should keep this separate from the phrase where *bēn* is followed by the species of an animal.

Indicating the sex?

One might think that בֶּן-בָּקָר *ben-bāqār* could refer to a male animal (or be unspecified for sex), and, in contrast, בַּת-בָּקָר *bat-bāqār* ‘daughter-of-cattle’ could clearly talk of a female animal. This is not easy to argue for, partly because *bat-bāqār* is not attested in the Old Testament. I am not aware of any reference where the context suggests that the ‘son/daughter-of’ phrase serves to clarify the sex of the animal. But there is an example for the opposite – see the comment on Num 15:8 further below.

Indicating the number?

The ‘son-of-cattle’ phrase is not needed for giving the number of cattle either. Although בָּקָר is a collective noun, it *can* come with a number word, at least exceptionally (1Ki 7:44 and parallels: וְאֵת-הַבָּקָר שְׁנַיִם-עָשָׂר ‘and the twelve oxen’). Further, the word פָּר can be used with number words. Compare, for instance:

Ex 29:1 פָּר אֶחָד בֶּן-בָּקָר ‘bull, one, son-of-cattle’

Num 28:11 פָּרִים בְּנֵי-בָקָר שְׁנַיִם ‘bulls, sons-of-cattle, two’

In the first example the number word follows פָּר, in the second one it follows the בְּנֵי-בָקָר phrase. Thus, for counting, there are other ways than using the ‘son-of-cattle’ phrase.

3.3. Results

- As HALOT’s entry states it, a פָּר *par* is a **bull**. It is not proven that ‘young’ is an essential part of the meaning. Therefore, translating ‘bull’ is usually to be preferred over ‘young bull’. The context will sometimes show the age. – One advantage of translating with ‘young bull / bullock’ would be that this translation distinguishes the term from שׂוֹר *šôr*, the normal adult cattle. If this approach is taken, the adjective ‘young’ would not need to be repeated every time though.
- When בֵּן *bēn* is used of animals, it means a **young one**. This is the primary sense.
- This is definitely the case with the phrase בְּנֵי (הַ) יוֹנָה *b’nê (hay)yônâ*. This should be translated ‘**young pigeons**’. The phrase occurs in the following places: Lev 1:14; 5:7; 5:11; 12:6; 12:8; 14:22; 14:30; 15:14; 15:29; Num 6:10; and in Luke 2:24. In the Old Testament, the English translations are quite evenly divided in keeping the word “young” in the text or not. There is a lack of consistency in how, for example, NRSV deals with the places in Leviticus as opposed to the one in Numbers and the one in Luke.
- As to the phrase בֶּן-בָּקָר *ben-bāqār*, a translation expressing “young one(s)” is in place in Gen 18:7-8 and 1Sam 14:32.
- Most cases, however, appear in a sacrificial context. Here, the phrase is used mainly to **clarify the species**: Adding *ben-bāqār* ensures that *par* is understood as referring to cattle, not to some other kind of ‘bull’.

Taking Ex 29:1/3 as an example, the English versions all translate the full phrase *par ben-bāqār* in v. 1 as “young bull”, whereas *par* in v. 3 is translated by “bull”, except NLT uses “young bull” again (the word does, of course, refer to the same animal as the one in v. 1), and CEV replaces the word with a summarizing expression. – This shows that all versions take the phrase *ben-bāqār* as indicating the young age. This is a case where a literal translation expressing ‘young one’ reflects the Hebrew words closely, but can be slightly misleading, because no emphasis on the age is intended.

On the other hand again, the phrase *ben-bāqār* is not used completely by itself, but in places where the kind of animal has already been specified. This speaks against overestimating its role in identifying the species.

- It is not the primary function of *ben-bāqār* to specify the (precise) age, or sex, or number of animals either. Where *ben-bāqār* comes without *par*, it should not be translated as ‘bull’, excluding female animals, unless the context demands it (see on Num 15:8 below). To put it the other way round, when it comes to specifying the male sex of a sacrificial animal from the cattle, it is the word *par* which does that, not the phrase *ben-bāqār*. (There is also the possibility to use the word זָכָר *zākār* ‘male’, as in Lev 1:3.)
- In translation, there will be cases where *ben-bāqār* is felt redundant after *par*, and can be dropped.

4. On the logic regarding the age of sacrificial animals

Several resources suggest that *par*, typically, is a (relatively) young animal. The present writer does not want to deny this possibility, but the investigation so far has not revealed much data to confirm this view. This leads us to the question: what is the logic regarding the age of sacrificial animals in the Old Testament? In particular, why do we often encounter the requirement that an animal should be “one year old”? The remarks below should help to better understand the factors that make a valid sacrifice.

4.1. The basic rule indicates no age

Lev 22:27 says about acceptable sacrifices:

When an ox or a sheep or a goat is born, it shall remain seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be accepted as a sacrifice of an offering by fire to the LORD.

This states clearly that – **in principle – animals much younger than a year were acceptable sacrifices.** In fact, in the case of firstborns, they were *required* to be brought on the eighth day, see Ex 22:29 [English 30].

In all of Lev 1–7, where the requirements for regular sacrifices are spelled out, there is **not one specification about the age of the animals in terms of years.** One detail that Num 15:27 adds to Lev 1–7 is that the female goat for an individual’s sin offering is to be “a year old”.

4.2. There is no upward limit in the age

Hartley suggests (on Lev 22:27):

Many times it is expressed that an animal for sacrifice should be a year old ..., but no upward limit is put on the age of an animal for sacrifice. In Judg 6:25 there is reference to offering up a bull that was seven years old.

I am not aware of places where, if mentioned at all, the number of years for a sacrificial animal is anything else than *one*, with the following exceptions:

- In Gen 15:9, where the Lord makes his covenant with Abram, he demands a heifer, a goat and a ram, all *three year old*. But commentators agree that, while there are close parallels, the covenant ritual is not a “sacrifice” in the proper sense, or at least not like those in the Sinaitic Law (Keil, Jacob (1934), Hamilton (1990)).
- According to Judg 6:25-27, Gideon sacrifices a **seven-year-old bull**. The verse comes with textual problems, but Butler (2009) and Webb (2012) both retain the “seven years” (as does Keil). Both agree in seeing in this bull a **prime animal that was kept for breeding purposes**.⁶

⁶ Butler says:

The seven-year-old bull must have been “a prime breeding bull” (J. Walton et al., *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 254).

Webb comments:

The first bull, an *ox*, is a draught animal normally used for heavy work; the second, a prime young bull seven years old, is a stud animal (ideal for breeding purposes). The fact that this second bull is specified for the burnt offering suggests that it has been chosen specifically for this purpose, and that the heavy work of demolition and reconstruction is to be done mainly or solely with the first bull.

- In 1Sam 1:24, Hanna brings “a three-year-old bull” to Shiloh for the dedication of her son Samuel – if we follow what most scholars think the text should read (HOTTP rates it {B}); MT has “three bulls”.

From these references follows that bulls (and probably sheep and goats) **older than a year were appropriate for sacrifices**. *Par* cannot – at least not coercively – be defined as a “young bull / bullock”. On the other hand, we cannot reject the idea that *usually* it was a youngling (cf. the data from related languages in HALOT and Tsumura (2007) on 1Sam 1:24).

4.3. Where and why one-year-old lambs are required

But very often, lambs “one year old” were required.⁷ Such is the case at the following occasions:

- all regular festivals, including the Passover (Num 28-29)
- the ordination of Aaron and his sons (Lev 9:3; it also mentions the untypical case of a *calf* a year old being required)
- the dedication of the Tabernacle (Num 7:15ff.)
- after childbirth (Lev 12:6)
- as part of the Nazirite rituals (Num 6:12/14).

The requirement of the animal having to be one year old makes sense only if it means a condition that is more restrictive, and more difficult to fulfil, than the normal standard.

Let us look at a few key places and what the commentaries have to say about them.⁸

The phrase ... first occurs in Ex 12:5 (NRSV), which says about the Passover:

Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats.

The interpretation of the phrase בֶּן־שָׁנָה *ben-šānâ* ‘son of a year’ is disputed.

Keil (1878) comments:

This does not mean “standing in the first year, viz. from the eighth day of its life to the termination of the first year” (*Rabb. Cler.*, etc.), a rule which applied to the other sacrifices only (chap. xxii. 29; Lev. xxii. 27). ... It was to be ... a year old, because it was not till then that it reached the full, fresh vigour of its life.

As Houtman (1989) presents the following options:

(1) ‘being in the first year of life’ ... [with literature, but without reasoning]; (2) according to the Samaritans, an animal of the calendar year that began in October is meant; (3) ‘one year old;’ this is the currently favored interpretation; ... in my opinion it is stated that it must have reached the age of one year; only an animal that is not overly young is suitable ... [with literature].

The sympathetic view that an animal should not be “overly young” does not go together with what we have read in Lev 22:27. But leaving aside the reasoning – if Houtman is right about the age, then his translation deserves attention: “an animal ... at least one year old” (see further below).

⁷ Taken together, the phrase בֶּן־שָׁנָה *ben-šānâ* ‘son-of-a-year’ (only Ex 12:5) and its variants בְּנֵי־שָׁנָה *bⁿnê-šānâ* ‘sons of a year’ (e.g. Ex 29:38) and בֶּן־שָׁנָתוֹ *ben-šⁿnātô* ‘son-of-its-year’ (e.g. Lev 12:6) occur over 50 times.

⁸ I chose to look at Ex 12:5 (the first occurrence of the phrase *ben-šānâ*, and relating to the Passover), Lev 9:3 (the phrase’s first occurrence in this book on sacrifices), and Num 28:3 (the first occurrence in the two chapters on the regular sacrifices). Wenham (1979), Levine (1989), and Milgrom (Leviticus 17–22, 2000) do not elaborate on the reasoning for the age of one year for sacrificial animals – neither at Lev 9:3, which states the one-year rule, nor at Lev 22:27, which states the eighth-day rule. Milgrom (Leviticus 1–16, 1991) only states (on Lev 9:3): “That the two burnt offerings consist of young animals cannot be an accident, but the rationale escapes me.” Nor do the commentators of Numbers (Wenham (1981), Budd (1984), Milgrom (1990), Ashley (1993), Brueggemann (2008)) comment on the same phrase in Num 7:17 or 28:3.

Stuart (2006) explains:

A year-old goat kid or lamb is a virtually full-grown animal. Since lambing and goat kidding took place in the spring in ancient times (before modern artificial breeding allowed for other lambing/kidding schedules) and the Passover took place in the spring, there is every reason to take literally the language indicating that the animal to be eaten would be a year old, not merely within its first year of life.

Now when we consider other sacrifices that are not bound by the festival calendar (with the Passover being celebrated in the spring), this definition needs adapting. E.g., the Nazirite is to bring “a male lamb a year old for a guilt offering” (Num 6:12). This could happen at any time of the year.

It seems reasonable to think of an animal a year old *or older*, not younger.

Baker (2008) takes a similar view. On Lev 22:17ff., which talks about the suitability of animals for sacrifice, he says “It would be human nature to try to offer substandard animals.” He continues to say (on Lev 22:27):

People must have sought other ways to lower the cost of offerings, in this case by bringing very young animals that would not as yet have cost anything for feed and care. Animals must be at least a week old ..., with indications that yearlings were preferred (e.g., 9:3; 12:6).

It is not my impression that the rule about the week-old animal is foremost to address stingy giving. But Baker seems right in observing a preference for yearlings.

Das Große Bibellexikon (1987) argues the same way. It says (s.v. Opfer, § I. Im Alten Testament, IV. Die gesetzlichen Anordnungen für den Opferkult, p. 1096):

Der Grundsatz: »Das Beste für Gott!« wurde durchweg beachtet, so hinsichtlich des Geschlechts: man zog männliche Tiere den weiblichen vor ..., und im Blick auf das Alter: Ausgewachsene Tiere hatten einen besonderen Wert (1Sam 1,24).

English: The principle „The best for God!” was observed throughout, both in regard to the sex: male animals were preferred over female ones ..., and with regard to the age: fully-grown animals had a special value (1Sam 1:24).

Thus the writer shares the view that an older – or full-grown – animal was more valuable.

Harrison (1980) thinks differently. He says (on Lev 9:3):

The consistent attention to detail which the levitical sacrificial system requires is illustrated by the mention of the lamb, which to be considered as such must be less than a year old, after which time it becomes mutton.

This sounds as if the regulation was putting forward a *maximum* age. Others do not follow the same logic.

The phrase *ben-šānā* ‘son-of-a-year’ also occurs in **Micah 6:6**. The verse says (NRSV):

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

Interestingly, the commentaries on the prophet Micah have more to say on our question than those on the Pentateuch. They all agree that the one-year-old rule asks for a higher sacrifice.

Allen (1976) explains:

... He would gladly give *yearling calves* as his sacrifice. Calves were eligible for sacrifice from the age of seven days, but yearlings were regarded as the best. Obviously the older the beast the more had been spent on its upkeep and the greater the economic loss to the worshipper. But he is prepared to keep his steers till their prime to provide a valuable offering. Only the best was good enough for God.

Waltke (1993) says:

He escalates the bargaining from holocausts, to one-year-old calves (already more costly), to thousands of rams, ...

But he does not say why one-year-old calves would be more costly than holocausts.

Wolff (1982; transl. 1990) comments:

“Calves one year old,” because of their tenderness, are a favored delicacy; in connection with burnt offerings, the expression occurs elsewhere only in Lev. 9:3. According to Lev. 22:27, calves are acceptable as sacrificial animals from their eighth day on (as are lambs and kids). Apparently v. 6b presents a first heightening in the quality of the offering.

The *Handbook* just says (on Lev 9:3):

... Each of the two animals must be approximately a year old. ...

4.4. Discussion

It has been difficult to glean hard and fast facts from the literature about why animals of a certain age were demanded, or preferred, as sacrifices – apart from more or less commonly held views.

One could ask: If animals older than one year are not “lambs” or “calves” anymore, then why do the texts specify that an animal should be a year old at least? Could they not just state that a ram or a bull should be chosen?

The answer is probably that the second year is a transitional phase: the animal needs less care, can feed on grass independently, is theoretically sexually mature, but is not yet normally used for breeding or having calves.

Hartley (1992) quotes Rashi as making the following distinction regarding Lev 9:2:

Aaron is to present for himself and his house **עגל בן-בקר**, “a young bull,” for a purification offering ... Rashi takes the phrase **עגל בן-בקר** to specify a two-year-old bull, while **עגל** alone refers to a yearling.

Even if this distinction is not convincing, the quotation shows that the word **עגל** *ēgel* ‘calf’ can apply to animals older than a year.

On the other hand, Jacob (1940), when discussing Ex 12:3, refers to MPara I,3 saying that an **איל** *ayil* ‘ram’ was “at least one year and 31 days” old (*orig.*: “im Alter von mindestens einem Jahre und 31 Tagen”). Whether this was universally agreed upon maybe questioned. It would make the difference between an *ayil* and a “lamb a year old” a minimal one.

Anyway, the Law does not always require a ram. In many cases, a lamb is good enough. However, it shall not be a lamb under one year.

One may ask: is a one-year-old lamb or calf valuable, because it is *already* a year old and has received a certain amount of feeding and caring, or because it is *not yet more* than a year old and still possesses all potential to be used for the owner’s purposes (for breeding, for milk- and wool production, as a draft animal ...)?

Another question is: was the quality of the meat really a concern? In peace offerings, the meat was eaten by the worshippers, so the taste would matter, but the one-year-old rule concerns regular and special burnt offerings, not peace offerings.

Perhaps we are to conclude that – apart from first-borns, who are sacrificed on the eighth day – a one-year-old lamb is the ideal choice for a sacrifice (as long as no ram is required), because it is “a lamb at its best”: it was valuable, because it had received a good amount of care until then, and was almost fully-grown, and at the same time held still all the potential for further breeding etc. Notwithstanding, animals both younger and older than one year were acceptable in principle (e.g. for peace offerings).⁹

4.5. Results

If the majority of commentators are right in thinking of “an animal ... at least one year old”, then we should consider expressing this in our translations.

⁹ The occasional mentioning of “**fatlings**” could also contribute to our idea about the ideal sacrifice. This point cannot be pursued in this article, but as a “placeholder” let me quote ISBE, which gives the following definition for “Fatling; fatted animal” (vol. 2, p. 287):

A domestic animal, generally young, well cared for, and fattened for sacrificial slaughter, although not restricted to such use (cf. 1Sam 28:24; Matt. 22:4; see also Prov 15:17; Jer 46:21).

There are cultures which are so close to the world of the Old Testament and its animal husbandry that such an explanation might be superfluous. But such people groups will have a sophisticated vocabulary for domestic animals, and might need sound input about the meaning of Hebrew words before they can make the appropriate word choice.

Then there are cultures where the majority is so little familiar with farm life that the phrase “one year old” seems an arbitrary condition. Here, it could help to either say “at least one year old”, or “already a year old [or more]”. Another way would be to speak of a “yearling”, if the receptor language has such a term and if it is known well enough (if readers take it to mean “under a year old”, that would be counterproductive).

5. Applying the findings to unclear places in Numbers

Translating the book of Numbers precisely and clearly sometimes demands familiarity with some of the details that were presented above.

5.1. Num 6:12

In Num 6:12 we read that the **Nazarite** shall bring **כֶּבֶשׂ בֶּן־שָׁנָה לְאִשָּׁם** – according to NASB “a male lamb a year old for a guilt offering”. The majority of commentaries and versions render **כֶּבֶשׂ** with “male lamb”. E.g., the *Handbook* says that a male is in view and points out that in v. 14, the same term is used, and next to it also the equivalent female term. We cannot be certain, but the fact that the normal guilt offering was a ram makes it somewhat likely that the animal in Num 6:12 **should also be a male one**. NIV, NET and NLT all have “male lamb”, GNB says “lamb”.¹⁰

There is a minor question about the age. As we saw above, according to Lev 5:15 the normal animal for a guilt offering was a **ram** – a full-grown male sheep. Why, then, does Num 6:12 speak of a **כֶּבֶשׂ בֶּן־שָׁנָה**? The simplest way of looking at it is that this is a special case: normally, a ram was required, but for the Nazirite it was a one-year-old male lamb.

5.2. Num 6:14

When a Nazirite’s period of separation is over, he is instructed as follows:

NRSV: and they shall offer their gift to the Lord, one male lamb [כֶּבֶשׂ] a year old [בֶּן־שָׁנָה] without blemish as a burnt offering, one ewe lamb [כֶּבֶשְׂהָרָה] a year old [בֶּת־שָׁנָה] without blemish as a sin offering, ...

This verse is included for the sake of completeness. It does not pose a problem of interpretation. The *sex* of the animals is specified by the word choice. The *number* of each kind of animal is specified by the number words for ‘one’ (**אֶחָד; אֶחָת**). The ‘son-of-/daughter-of’ phrases with numbers serve to specify the *age*.

5.3. Num 7:15/17

Num 7 tells us about the tribal leaders’ offerings at the dedication of the Tabernacle. Nahshon’s offering includes the following items (and all others bring the same):

¹⁰ Milgrom (Numbers, JPSTC, 1990) points to another case where a **כֶּבֶשׂ** is used for a guilt offering, i.e. Lev 14:12/21. That passage is related to cleansing from a skin disease. In Num 6:12, NJPS translates “a lamb in its first year”. Milgrom (Numbers, JPSTC, 1990) apparently agrees, he does not discuss the question male *versus* female. But in Lev 14:12, NJPS translates “male lamb”, and Milgrom (Leviticus, AB, 1991) has no issue with that either. Ashley, in Num 6:12, translates “a yearling lamb” and comments:

The reparation offering of a male yearling lamb is unique. Elsewhere, when a lamb is offered, it is a female (Lev. 5:6), or the age of the male animal is not stated (Lev. 14:21).

However, the reference Lev 5:6 is not helpful. Although the word **אִשָּׁם** occurs there, the verse is not about guilt offering, but about sin offering (so Milgrom and the *Handbook*).

NRSV: ¹⁵ one young bull [פֶּרֶךְ אֶחָד בֶּן־בָּקָר], one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering;

It is important that the text states that the animals are intended “**for a burnt offering**”. These **required male animals** (Lev 1:3). Therefore, in translation, a word like *cow* in English would not be right. “Bull” is correct. “Young bull”, in my view, is slightly over-translating the Hebrew.

Things are different in v. 17. It reads:

NRSV: ¹⁷ and for the sacrifice of well-being, two oxen [בָּקָר שְׁנַיִם], five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. ...

For the “sacrifice of well-being” – more commonly called “**peace offering**” – the animals **could be male or female** (Lev 3:1). Therefore, the translation should be at least open for understanding either, or even make this explicit. **It is apparently no coincidence that the Hebrew text simply speaks of בָּקָר ‘cattle’** – without the word פֶּרֶךְ ‘bull’. All English versions translate with *bull* or *oxen*. *Bull* wrongly restrains the meaning to male animals, and *oxen* is doubly problematic because in today’s usage the word suggests castrated animals, which were forbidden in sacrifice anyway. Remarkably, the French versions **keep a distinction between v. 15 and v. 17**: FCL, PDV2017 and NBS02 all use *taureau* (= ‘bull’) in v. 15, but *bœuf* (= ‘ox’; but commonly used unspecifically for sex, like *cow*) in v. 17! This is the right thing to do. (BDS differs. It uses *jeune taureau* in v. 15, and *taureau* in v. 17.) – Naturally, what is said here on vv. 15 and 17 applies to the other eleven cases in this chapter as well.

One problem with the understanding presented here is that in 7:87-88, where the totals of what the tribal leaders brought are given, it says that the cattle for the peace offering were “24 *parîm*”. One might have expected the word שׂוֹר *sôr*, which is unspecific. But perhaps *par*, in the plural, can be used in the same way. In this place, the French versions diverge: FCL and PDV have *taureaux*, NBS keeps *bœuf*. (Milgrom says (on Num 7:15): “In the offerings of the individual chieftains, Hebrew *bakar* is shorthand for “bulls of the herd” ...”)

Admittedly, another factor speaking against the strict distinction between burnt- and peace offerings here is that the tribal leaders brought goats which were explicitly male ones (עִתוּד *‘attûd* ‘he-goat’) for the peace offerings, although female ones would have been acceptable.

5.4. Num 8:8/12

Num 8 reports about the dedication of the Levites. Verses 8 and 12 read:

⁸ Then let them take a bull [פֶּרֶךְ אֶחָד בֶּן־בָּקָר] with its grain offering, fine flour mixed with oil; and a second bull you shall take for a sin offering. ... ¹² Now the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the bulls [הַפָּרִים]; then offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering to the LORD, to make atonement for the Levites.

For both burnt offerings and sin offerings, male animals are required (Lev 1:3; 4:3/14). Thus ‘bull’ is correct. – These verses show that פֶּרֶךְ is enough to refer to what was identified before as פֶּרֶךְ אֶחָד בֶּן־בָּקָר.

5.5. Num 15:5

This verse reads:

and you shall prepare wine for the drink offering, one-fourth of a hin, with the burnt offering or for the sacrifice, for each lamb [כֶּבֶדֶשׁ].

Here, because so-called “sacrifice” [זֶבַח] can include peace offerings and thus female animals, translators should not reduce the meaning to male lambs (and with the exception of CEV no English version does). See the next paragraph for a fuller explanation, and note the contrast to Num 28-29 further below.

5.6. Num 15:8

This verse reads:

NRSV: When you offer a bull [בָּן־בָּקָר] as a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or as an offering of well-being to the Lord,

NASB: When you prepare a bull as a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a special vow, or for peace offerings to the LORD,

The *Handbook* says that “**Bull** is literally “son of cattle” (compare 7.15).” That is not quite enough to deal with this verse.

The instruction in this verse relates to a number of different cases, it includes “a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a special vow, or for peace offerings to the LORD” (cf. v. 3). Again, peace offerings did not require a male animal. **Thus בָּן־בָּקָר here includes cows.**

The theme of this whole passage 15:1-16 are **the offerings that accompany the animal sacrifices**. With the exception of NIV, the English versions fail to bring this out in their section headings.

V. 3 mentions offerings in general – as “from the herd or from the flock” (בָּן־הַבָּקָר אוֹ מִן־הַצֹּאן). Then, vv. 4-5 talk about lambs and vv. 6-7 about rams. When we get to v. 8, בָּן־בָּקָר must refer to cattle. The purpose of the passage is not to specify which animals qualify for which type of sacrifice. **The passage is about the right quantities for the meal- and drink offerings. This apparently applies to both burnt offerings and peace offerings. Therefore, the translation should include the possibility of a female sacrificial animal:** if an Israelite decided to offer a cow, he had to bring the same meal- and drink offerings along as for a bull.

All English versions translate with bullock / young bull / bull. This does not fit the context. It is not as inclusive as it should be.¹¹ The matter is not discussed in the commentaries. NJPS stands out with the appropriate wording “an animal from the herd”. Similarly to 17:7, **the French versions are more inclusive**, or at least ambiguous in a positive way: NBS02 *bovin* (= ‘bovine; cattle’); FCL97 and PDV00 *bœuf* (= ‘ox’); (BDS differs from the others again, and is again imprecise with *un veau* (= ‘calf’), which restricts it to young ones).

This verse, then, confirms what was said further above – that there are places where בָּן־בָּקָר – diverging from the more common use of בָּן in animals – specifies not the relatively young age, but the species of the animal. Apparently, in Hebrew, it does not make a difference whether it says בָּקָר (only), as in Num 7:17, or בָּן־בָּקָר, as in Num 15:8. Both refer to (or include) peace offerings. It is therefore not crucial to distinguish them in translation. Expressing young age would reflect what was probably the normal practice for sacrifices, but there was no hard and fast rule about this.

5.7. Num 15:24

Num 15:24 is not part of the above passage anymore, but part of a passage on **offerings for unintentional sins**. The verse reads:

then it shall be, if it is done unintentionally, without the knowledge of the congregation, that all the congregation shall offer one bull [פֶּרֶךְ־בָּן־בָּקָר] for a burnt offering, as a soothing aroma to the LORD, with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the ordinance, and one male goat [שְׂעִיר־עִזִּים] for a sin offering.

The reference of פֶּרֶךְ־בָּן־בָּקָר is clear. It is for a burnt offering again, and thus a male animal is required. As to שְׂעִיר־עִזִּים, it could theoretically refer to any goat, but in the legislation on sin offerings in Lev 4:23/28, the male and female goat were distinguished and

¹¹ The *Realia Handbook*, in its section about cattle (31-36), thankfully begins with explaining the *English* terminology. There, it states:

Cows and Bulls: Although cows are strictly speaking adult female cattle the word in modern English is sometimes used to mean “cattle” without reference to gender especially when using numbers. Thus “400 cows” can mean “400 head of cattle.” TEV sometimes uses the word in this sense. The word for adult male cattle, “bulls”, is never used with this more general meaning.

so it seems right to follow the advice in the *Animals Handbook* (49-50): "... when both *sa 'ir* and another word for goat appear in the same context, *sa 'ir* should be translated as male goat."¹² This is what almost all English versions do.

5.8. Num 23

Interestingly, in the story of Balak and Balaam, there is only talk of פָּר, never of בֶּן־בָּקָר. Possibly this has to do with the fact that this story reports about the sacrifices that the pagan king Balak brought, whereas most other instances in Numbers are part of the Israelite law and require more precision. Anyhow, we should assume male animals in Num 23.

5.9. Num 28-29

- The chapters Num 28-29 are about burnt offerings. Therefore כֶּבֶשׂ must refer to **male lambs**. Taking 28:3 as an example, some versions make this explicit (e.g. NASB, GNB), others do not (e.g. NIV, NET). It is a choice that the translator has to make.
- Analogously, the phrase בֶּן־בָּקָר פָּר in 28:11 ff. refers to **male cattle** here. Thus "bull" is correct.
- For 'goat', in Num 28:15ff. the same term is used as in Num 15:24 [שְׂעִיר עִזִּים]. A **male goat** must be in view (so also Ashley and the *Handbook*). Most English versions have it like this. NJPS just says "goat" here (but not in 15:24).

6. Conclusion

The laws on sacrifices use technical language and demand precision. The rich vocabulary of some receptor languages equally calls for exact input from the exegete. The theme of sacrificial animals is an example for issues in Bible translation that require not only linguistic analysis, but also knowledge from other disciplines, in this case animal husbandry.

I realize that a number of issues could either not be solved fully, or not even be addressed at all. Nevertheless, the above investigation should help with (a) keeping the distinction between burnt offerings and peace offerings by either distinguishing, or *not* distinguishing, between male and female animals; (b) understanding the enigmatic phrase *par ben-bāqār* as specifying a bull (not necessarily a young one); (c) translating *bⁿē hayyônâ* correctly as "young pigeons"; (d) rendering the phrase *ben-šānâ* 'son of a year' more meaningful as a minimum requirement, rather than an arbitrary stipulation.

Thus, translators can have more certainty in their choices, and justify them better. Even if the present discussion results only in minimal changes in translation, the translator himself might have gained some insights into the texts about sacrifices, and thus have entered a step further into the ideas that form the background for talking of "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world".

Abbreviations

HALOT	Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament
<i>Handbook</i>	The respective volume of the UBS Handbook Series
NIDOTTE	New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis

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¹² It is not entirely clear how the prescriptions in Num 15:24 relate to those in Lev 4:22ff. For this question, see Wenham (1981) and Ashley (1993).

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