

The Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16:1-34

I. Introduction

- A. Chapter 16 describes the day of atonement ritual, an annual festival held on the 10th day of the 7th month of the Jewish calendar.
- B. It was the most solemn of Israel's festivals, and "the climax and crown of Israel's theology of sanctification" (Mays, 52).
- C. The day is referred to in traditional Judaism as *Yom Kippur*. In the OT, the day is not named in chapter 16, but in Leviticus 23:27, 28 and 25:9 it is referred to as *Yom Hakkippurim*, "day of atonements."

II. Literary Setting

- A. Chapter 16 falls in the center of the book of Leviticus, and rightly holds a central place as the theological hinge pin of the entire book.
- B. Everything in the preceding chapters anticipates this day and every subsequent chapter is finds its motivation and enablement in light of it.
 - 1. It presumes the sacrificial offerings (chs. 1-7)
 - 2. It presumes the central role of the high priest (chs. 8-10)
 - 3. It presumes the necessity of purification from uncleanness (chs. 11-15), particularly the need to purify the tabernacle from uncleanness brought on by Israel's impurity (15:31).
 - 4. It provides the spiritual energy to accomplish holiness laws (chs. 17-27)

III. Exposition

A. Historical Introduction (16:1-2)

- 1. The deaths of Nadab and Abihu (10:1-20) provide the historical background and germination for the instructions given (16:1). The carelessness with which they approached Yahweh cannot occur in Israel, and the proceeding instructions aim to prevent another such event.
- 2. The high priest was the most important person in the nation, for he represented them before Yahweh. No other event in Israel's theological calendar highlighted the prominence of the high priest than the day of atonement.
- 3. Likewise, no other event underscored the limitations of the high priest, who did not have unlimited access to God. He could not enter the Most Holy Place any time he pleased, for God's manifest presence resided there. Doing so would result in his death (10:2).

B. The High Priest's Preparations (16:3-10)

1. His sacrifices (16:3, 6)

- a) The high priest, as important as he was to Israelite life and theology, was a sinner who could only approach God with an appropriate sacrifice.
- b) Before he could enter behind the veil, he had to bring a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering
- c) Likewise, before he could represent the people, he first needed to be cleansed of his impurity and forgiven of his own sins.

2. His garments (16:4)

- a) The garments usually worn by the high priest were ornate and regal (cf. Exod 28). They depicted his prominence as God's representative to the people. But for this occasion, the high priest wore a different set of garments—or at the very least, a simplified version of his normal attire.
- b) This consisted of a white linen shirt, leggings (to cover his “flesh”, i.e., genitals), sash, and turban or headband. For this occasion, he wore no robe, no ephod, no breastplate, and no diadem on his headband. This means he did not enter into the Most Holy Place with his bell-adorned robe, nor does the text mention anything about a rope tied around his leg.
- c) This simplified uniform was representative of his humble status as Israel's representative before the holy God (16:4).
- d) “Among his fellow men his dignity as the great mediator between man and God is unsurpassed, and his splendid clothes draw attention to the glory of his office. But in the presence of God even the high priest is stripped of all honor: he becomes simply the servant of the King of kings, whose true status is portrayed in the simplicity of his dress” (Wenham, 230).
- e) He was required to bathe in water and then don his special clothing.

3. His casting lots (16:5, 7-10)

- a) The congregation provided two goats for Aaron to offer as sin offerings for the congregation. Additionally, they provided a ram for a burnt offering. (16:5).
- b) Aaron took the two goats, brought them to entrance of the tabernacle and cast lots. The process by which this occurred is unclear, but the purpose was to determine which goat was “for Yahweh” and which one was “for Azazel” (see discussion on this term below).
- c) The first goat would be presented to Yahweh as a sin offering, while the second goat was taken into the wilderness.
- d) Interpretive Issue: What is the meaning of “Azazel”?

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The identification of “Azazel” has garnered numerous explanations from commentators, and continues to be a difficult issue. There are four main explanations for this term:

(1) Function of the goat

- (a) The term could be viewed as a combination of “goat” (*'az*) and “to depart” (*'azal*), meaning “the goat that departs.”
- (b) Thus, it refers to the function of the goat as the one which departs from the camp carrying the nation’s sins.
- (c) This explanation is the basis for the traditional translation “scapegoat,” which was first used in the 1530 Tyndale translation, but which finds support in the LXX and the Vulgate.

(2) Entire removal

- (a) The term could be related to the Arabic term *'azala*, meaning “removal.
- (b) This view would seem to indicate that the term refers to the complete removal of sin from the camp.

(3) Location where the goat departs

- (a) The term could be related to the term *'azaz*, “strong, fierce,” referring to the type of terrain where the goat was released.
- (b) There could also be secondary support for this with the Arabic term *'azazu*, meaning “rough ground.”
- (c) This is the traditional Jewish interpretation.

(4) Name of a demon

- (a) A more recent interpretation views the term as the identification of a demon whose domain was the wilderness where the goat was released.
- (b) Proponents note the parallelism between the first goat which is “for Yahweh” and the second goat which is “for Azazel,” indicating another person or individual (i.e., demon).
- (c) There is a reference to Azazel in the intertestamental writing 1 Enoch, as well as the reference to the “goat demons” in Lev 17:7.

(5) Summary and conclusion

- (a) View (4) is the least likely prospect. There is no scriptural support that demons have any role in the process of atonement. Even if one views it as sending the goat away to the source of evil (i.e., demons or Satan himself), there is no textual support for this view.

- (b) Views (1), (2), and (3) carry linguistic support, but the best evidence seems to support view (3), referring to the wilderness where the goat is released.

C. The High Priest's Ceremonial Observances (16:11-28)

1. Sin offering for the high priest (16:11-14)

- a) Before the high priest could represent the people and offer sacrifice for them, he first had to deal with his own sins and impurities. This point is so important that it appears twice in this chapter (16:6, 11).
- b) The background of the high priestly sin offering is found in Lev 4:3-12, where the priest killed a bull and applied its blood to the altar of incense to cleanse it from impurities.
- c) On the day of atonement, however, the priest had to venture even further into the tabernacle—he had to go behind the veil and apply the blood to the mercy seat itself. This is one of the unique features of the day of atonement.
- d) In order to do this without dying, he first took burning coals from the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard and placed them in his censor, on top of which he placed aromatic incense. The mixture created a thick smoke which screened from his sight the mercy seat (Heb., *Hakkapporeth*, “place of atonement”), which was the “locus of God's presence, the site of God's condescension” (Rooker, 214).
- e) He sprinkled the blood with his finger on the front of the mercy seat, and then 7x in front of it. In so doing, he made “atonement for himself and for his house” (16:11).

2. Sin offerings for the people (16:15-22)

After offering a sin offering for his own uncleanness, he was clear to offer a sin offering for the people.

a) The first goat (16:15-19)

- (1) Under normal circumstances, a sin offering for the people consisted of a bull (4:14). But on the day of atonement, a goat was presented as a sin offering, marking this ceremony off as a unique type of sin offering.
- (2) The high priest was responsible for slaughtering the goat and bringing its blood—presumably along with the censor of incense—behind the veil where it was applied in like fashion to the blood of his own sin offering.
- (3) This act made “atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins” (16:16).
- (4) The word for “transgressions” (Heb., *Pesha*) is the most grievous word for sin. It is used in Leviticus for the first time here, and it speaks of gross rebellion and breach of relationship. In other words, atonement was being

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made not only for unintentional sins (which could be covered by a normal sin offering) but intentional sins as well.

- (5) After cleansing the Most Holy Place, the high priest then used the blood to cleanse the Tabernacle, which meant applying the blood to the altar of incense which stood before the veil.
 - (6) While inside the Tabernacle, no other person could enter in—even another priest. That would constitute a secondary mediator. As Wenham remarks, “Under both testaments there is but one mediator between God and man (cf. 1 Tim 2:5)” (Wenham, 233).
 - (7) After completing the rituals inside the Tabernacle, the high priest emerged and applied the blood of both the bull and the goat to the altar of burnt offering in order to cleanse it from the nation’s uncleanness.
- b) The second goat (16:20-22)

Following the sacrifice of the first goat, attention turns to the second goat.

- (1) In another unique feature of this day, the high priest laid *both* his hands on the head of the animal and confessed over it “all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins” (16:21).
- (2) The use of three different terms for sin—iniquities, transgressions, and sins—underscore the comprehensiveness of Israel’s sin and their need for forgiveness. Likewise, it revealed the comprehensiveness of the forgiveness made available on the day of atonement.
- (3) Jewish tradition in the Mishnah records that the high priest would say the following prayer of confession: “O God, thy people, the House of Israel, have committed iniquity, transgressed, and sinned before thee. O God, forgive, I pray, the iniquities and transgressions and sins which thy people, the House of Israel, have committed and transgressed and sinned before thee; as it is written in the law of thy servant Moses, ‘*For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you: from all your sins shall ye be clean before the Lord*’ (Yoma 6:2).
- (4) Confession was an important aspect of Israel’s religious life. The theology of confession is summarized in Proverbs 28:13, “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Rooker, 221). Other confessions in the OT demonstrate the corporate nature of this act and its importance in national repentance (Neh 9:1-38; Dan 9:4-19).
- (5) The goat was then sent out of the camp to a remote place in the wilderness by a designated individual.
- (6) This dramatic ceremony pictured the complete removal of Israel’s sin and uncleanness: “The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area” (16:22). In other words, while the first goat pictured the means of atonement

through blood, the second goat pictured the results of atonement in the removal of Israel's guilt.

- (7) The idea of removing sins is expressed elsewhere in the OT, and may even intentionally allude to this ceremony.
 - (a) David speaks of God removing Israel's transgressions from them "as far as the east it from the west" (Ps 103:12)
 - (b) Micah speaks of God casting Judah's iniquities "into the depths of the sea" (Mic 7:19).
 - (c) Isaiah speaks of the Suffering Servant as bearing Israel's griefs and sorrows (Isa 53:4) and sins (53:12) because God laid on him the iniquity of the nation (53:6).
- (8) In Jewish tradition, the goat was led to the edge of a precipice, where it was pushed off to fall to its death. There is no indication that this was required in the text. Instead, it was to be let free in the wilderness (16:22).
- (9) "The need for the nation as a whole to be purged of sin is portrayed vividly here. The rites in the holy of holies were unseen by the general public. The scapegoat ceremony was seen by all and could be understood by all. It was a powerful visual aid that demonstrated the reality of sin and the need to eliminate it" (Wenham, 237).

3. Purifications and burnt offerings (16:23-28)

- a) After the sin offerings had been made, the high priest removed his garments in the tabernacle and washed his body with water. This was necessary so that the tabernacle would not become impure and thus reverse what had just been accomplished through the preceding rituals (16:23-24a).
- b) Likewise, the individual who accompanied the second goat into the wilderness and let it loose was to wash his clothes and bathe in water before entering the camp, so as not to pollute the camp (16:26).
- c) With his body washed, the high priest put his garments back on and then offered the burnt offering rams—one for himself and the other for the people (16:24b).
- d) While the sin offerings cleansed them from uncleanness, the burnt offering was presented for acceptance and forgiveness before Yahweh. This was a standard progression in Israelite sacrifices.
- e) As for the rest of the sin offerings, the fat was burned on the altar (16:25) while the carcass and hide was carried outside the camp and burned (16:27), and the individual who carried this out had to bathe himself before returning to the camp (16:28).

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D. Concluding Instructions (16:29-34)

The remainder of the chapter overviews some important instructions regarding the day of atonement and its role in national religious life.

1. The permanence and solemnity of the festival (16:29, 31)
 - a) The Day of Atonement was to be a permanent festival in Israel, falling every year on the 10th day of the 7th month.
 - b) It was to be marked by acute solemnity among all the people. The nation was instructed to “afflict yourselves” (16:29), a phrase connected to fasting, prayer, and mourning (Isa 58:3, 5; Ps 35:13).
 - c) Likewise, the nation was instructed to treat the day as a Sabbath (16:29, 31). No one, either native or foreigner, was allowed to perform labor. They were to rest from normal activity in order to devote all their energies to spiritual preparation.
 - d) All these instructions underscore the necessity of contrition as a requirement for forgiveness. Since atonement was being made for their sins, the people must prepare spiritually.
 - e) This was the only required fast in the Israelite calendar.
 - f) “The instruction thus called for personal reflection, repentance, fasting, and prayer; to do this they denied themselves the luxuries and pleasures of life. The point is that they gave themselves over to focusing on the spiritual and not the physical. This emphasis was carried over in some segments of the church through the season of Lent before Easter” (Ross, 322).
2. The purpose of the festival (16:30)
 - a) The purpose of the day is clearly stated: it was a day on which atonement was made in order to cleanse the people.
 - b) The goal was that the people would “be clean before Yahweh.”
3. The priestly role in the festival (16:32-34)
 - a) The centrality of the priesthood is a critical component of the day of atonement.
 - b) Without the high priest, the people would have no representative before Yahweh, and thus no atonement or cleansing.
 - c) The chapter closes with a statement of full obedience on the part of Aaron.

IV. Purpose & Significance

As the central observance of the Levitical system, a number of key significant points mark this day and reveal its purpose in Israel’s religious life.

- A. The festival emphasized the holiness of Yahweh and the sinfulness of his people. Yahweh can only live among his people if their sin is dealt with through blood atonement.

- B. The festival also underscored the fact that Israel as a whole did not have direct access to God under the Mosaic covenant. Not even the high priest could approach God on his own initiative.
- C. But the day also reveals the incredible grace of God in providing a means of atonement for his people for the forgiveness of their sins and the continuing presence of Yahweh in their midst.
- D. The primary purpose, as stated in the text, was to cleanse the tabernacle—all the way into the Most Holy Place—from the impurities of the people. This allowed a holy God to live among a sinful people. “These atonement-day rituals make the impossible possible. By cleansing the sanctuary they permit the holy God to dwell among an unholy people” (Wenham, 233).
- E. But Rooker has observed that we should not restrict its purpose to cleansing alone: “Yet while the furnishings of the tabernacle were purified once during the observance of the Day of Atonement ritual (16:20), atonement was made for the high priest four times (16:6, 11, 17, 24) and for the people three times (16:16:10, 17, 24). Thus the forgiveness of the people is a critical part of the intent of the chapter, and one is justified in arguing that atonement for the high priest and the congregation is more the focal point of the chapter than the purification of the tabernacle. Moreover, since the uncleanness and sins of the people pollute the tabernacle, it would be essential for the people also to be purified if the tabernacle was to be cleansed; otherwise the tabernacle would immediately become contaminated after it had been purified” (Rooker, 212-3).

V. The Day of Atonement and the NT

- A. The language of the NT connects the day of atonement with the death of Christ. This fulfillment occurs at several crucial points:
 - 1. The death of Christ provided the full atonement for our sin through propitiating the wrath of God (Rom 3:25). In fact, some scholars argue that the use of *hilasterion* (“propitiation”) in this text is actually a reference to Christ as the “mercy seat,” since the term was normally used in the LXX to translate to the Hebrew word *kapporet* (“mercy seat”) in the OT. In other words, there is a possible typological relationship between the mercy seat in the OT as the place of atonement and the reference to Christ, potentially, as the “mercy seat”—the “locus of propitiation” (Rooker, 227).
 - 2. Although the NT makes no direct correlation between the second goat and Christ, theological parallels still exist. Just as the second goat was taken outside the camp, so Christ died outside the camp (Heb 13:11). In that act, he bore our sins and carried them away (1 Pet 2:24; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; Heb 9:28).
 - 3. When Christ died, the veil of the temple was torn in two, once for all time opening direct access to God for believers (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45).
- B. In particular, the Epistle to the Hebrews has as one of its primary themes the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement in Jesus Christ. “For Hebrews, the day of atonement prefigures the crucifixion. Christ on the cross achieved what the high priests of the Old Covenant had attempted to do on the day of atonement” (Wenham, 237).

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- C. The Book of Hebrews demonstrates this through a series of contrasts between Aaron and the Old Covenant ritual and Christ and the New Covenant reality:
1. Aaron entered the earthly tabernacle, which was a mere copy of the heavenly one, which Jesus entered to make eternal propitiation (Heb 9:24).
 2. Jesus offered his own blood—not the blood of bulls and goats—accomplishing eternal salvation (Heb 9:12-14; 10:4).
 3. Aaron required blood atonement to cleanse his own sins before representing the people. But Jesus required no such atonement. As the sinless Son of God, he entered behind the veil as the perfect representative for his people (Heb 7:26-28).
 4. The Day of Atonement under the Old Covenant was an annual festival. Every year it had to be repeated. But with the death of Christ, he accomplished atonement once for all in a never-to-be-repeated event (Heb 9:6-14, 25-28).
 5. The Day of Atonement under the Old Covenant allowed the people to continue their fellowship with God. But Jesus actually secured eternal forgiveness of his people (Heb 10:1-18).

VI. The Day of Atonement and the Christian

- A. Strictly speaking, the Day of Atonement as outlined in Leviticus 16 has no direct relevance to us, because everything it speaks of is—in reality—past tense.
1. Its laws, rituals, and procedures are no longer obligatory or necessary, for they have all found realization in the death of Jesus Christ.
 2. The Mass of the Roman Catholic Church is the supreme example of fundamentally misunderstanding what Christ accomplished on the cross. Since Christ's death secured our salvation through a single act, there is no need to crucify and re-crucify Jesus for the continual forgiveness of our sins.
- B. The fulfillment of the Day of Atonement in the death of Christ has secured for us direct access to God.
1. Thus, as believers under this New Covenant, we are able—even appealed—to respond to Christ's work: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:22).
 2. "The first Good Friday was the definitive day of atonement when man's sins were purged once and for all. Now every man who is in Christ has the right, once reserved only for the high priest, to enter into the presence of God. He could go in but once a year; we can draw near at any time" (Wenham, 237).
- C. The death of Christ and the atonement it accomplished becomes the means by which God's people live in holiness.
1. Hartley notes that under the Old Covenant, the Day of Atonement "prepares for the coming material on holy living. It may be said that the moral and spiritual energy for

- the people to fulfill the laws in chaps. 17-26 comes out of their finding complete expiation on the Day of Atonement. The ritual for the Day of Atonement thus appropriately stands before the laws on holy living” (Hartley, 217).
2. In the same way, the author to the Hebrews urged his readers—in light of the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement in Christ, to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb 10:23-24).
 3. The enablement and motivation for holy living under the New Covenant finds its source in the same place as under the Old Covenant—the atonement provided by God. But under the New Covenant, the atonement is perfect, complete, and final, thus providing an enablement which was never experienced by believers under the Old Covenant.
- D. Nevertheless, the common denominator between the two covenants remain—the necessity of true contrition and grief over sin. “True spiritual contrition is essential for any wishing to avail themselves of the eternal blessings of the sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah” (Ross, 324).