

THE TEMPLE – study 3

The Day of Atonement

Falling on the tenth day of Tishri (Sept-Oct) following the feast of Trumpets, the theme is of Forgiveness and of Redemption (Lev.16v34).

The name *Yom Kippur* means the “*Day of covering*” or “*concealing*”, the day when Israel’s sins were covered over. Other names also became attached to it - “A Day of Awe”, “The Day of the Fast” (Acts 27v9), “the Great Fast”, “the Great Day”, or simply, “the Day,” “and a Sabbath of rest.” The Qumran community, centred at the Dead Sea, knew it as “the Feast of Mercies” . Most especially it was a Festival that was concerned with both the *purpose* and *process* of atonement. Yom Kippur was a most solemn day in which a ceremony of making Atonement, literally *At-one-ment* was enacted, through which Israel could be reconciled to their God. “For on Yom Kippur the destiny of every Jew was decided at the Temple altar.” [Glaser: Fall Feasts]. So the ten days between Rosh-Hashanah / Feast of Trumpets and Yom Kippur were called the “Days of Awe” and the Sabbath that fell between the two feasts as “the Sabbath of Repentance.”

There were four elements to the Day of Atonement established from Lev. 23v27-28.

- 1] *A sacred assembly*- the focus on this one supreme day was upon the whole nation . Although the Day of Atonement was not a pilgrimage feast, what was performed in the Temple by the High Priest was done for all, wherever they might be (Lev.16v30).
- 2] *Deny yourselves* - although there was no specific instruction as to what this meant, fasting became an obvious interpretation of this ordinance. But the emphasis was not merely on outward denial but on inward change.
- 3] *Present an offering made to the Lord by fire* - a key element in the Day.
- 4] *Do no work on that day* – for this was a “Sabbath of Sabbaths” (Lev.23v31-32).

The High Priest - Leviticus16

Unlike with many of the other Temple sacrifices, the High Priest played the main role, for it was he who would stand before God on behalf of the people in the Most Holy Place, the meeting place of heaven and earth. It was vital therefore that he followed the prescribed instructions to the letter (cf Lev.10v1-3)!

In the course of the day he would make atonement for his own sins and for those of the priests and people as he following a complex series of ritual actions.

1. He bathed his entire body 5 times, and his hands and his feet 10 times.
2. At specific times in the day he wore special garments of white linen (Lev.16v4) rather than his usual more ornate and colourful high-priestly vestments, as he prepared himself to meet God “face to face.”
3. He prepared to offer sacrifice for himself, for the priests and the people and for the place, namely a young bull, a ram, seven lambs born that year and two goats.
4. He presented a sin offering for himself and for his family (Lev.16v6,11). The blood of the bull being sprinkled seven times on the “mercy seat” in the Most Holy Place.
5. He took two handfuls of incense and placed them in a pan full of coals taken from the Altar. The cloud rising up covered the mercy seat, like sweet prayers for mercy, for God was pleased to forgive (cf Ps.141v2).

The Preparation for the Day of Atonement

In the week preceding the feast day, the High Priest would lodge in the Temple precincts. This was to ensure that he was kept free from any danger of becoming ritually unclean. During this week the High Priest would take part in all the daily Temple sacrifices, serving as an ordinary priest and wearing, like them, a white linen robe.

At the same time members of the Sanhedrin would instruct and remind him as to his duties on the actual day and how the sacrifices were to be conducted. They did this firstly because with a year’s interval between the Feast the High Priest might have forgotten something and secondly to ensure that the sacrifices were carried out in accordance with the Pharisaic interpretation of when and how things should be done. And an understudy high priest would also be carefully prepared just in case illness or even death prevented the High Priest from carrying out his duties.

Then the Great Sanhedrin handed the High Priest over to the charge of the Lesser Sanhedrin. They would read to him all of Lev.16 and Num. 29v7-11 and he would have to recite them back. On the night before the actual Day the elders made the High Priest solemnly swear not to alter any part of the next day’s service. Whereas it was the custom for many to eat well in preparation for the fast, the High Priest was required to stay up all night with the minimum of food in order to study and to prepare himself for the great occasion which lay ahead of him. Various strategies were employed to ensure that he kept awake and alert!

The Course of the Day (Lev.16)

Everything came to a stop for the Day of Atonement. As many as 75,000 pilgrims have crowded into Jerusalem and the Temple, whilst in the outlying districts and beyond, the synagogues likewise were crammed with eager and anxious worshippers. The Temple services began at dawn, but whilst it was still dark pious Jews would begin assembling, waiting for the first rays of the sun. Priests were stationed on the Temple roof to watch for the first signs of dawn and when the light was enough for them to see Hebron away to the South, they would call out, "The light of morning has reached Hebron!" and the Day would begin.

The sacrificial animals, personally inspected by the High Priest the day before, were made ready in the Temple precincts whilst the bull for his own sin offering was brought to him. He would put both hands upon its head and confess his sin before God and the people. At all times on this special day the High Priest would utter the "actual" name of God as it was written in the Torah, (where the consonants read YHWH), rather than using Adonai or some such substitute word (cf Num.6v22-27). It was actually forbidden to utter the "real" name of God outside of the Temple. Later on in the Day he would repeat this action, only this time confessing his and the priests' sins. He had to make intercession for himself and for the priests before he could make intercession for the people. Having confessed their sins over the head of the bull it was subsequently killed and its blood poured into a basin, which was stirred continuously by an assistant to stop the blood from congealing.

Two Goats

Two goats were also brought before the High Priest, ideally as identical as possible - alike in appearance, size and value and bought at the same time before being specially reared.

The High Priest cast lots to decide which goat was to be sacrificed and which to be the scapegoat, the *Azazel*. Taking two golden lots from the urn, one marked "*For the Lord*" and one for "*Azazel*", he placed one on each of the goat's heads. It was thought to be a good omen if the lot "*For the Lord*" was drawn out with the right hand. Tradition says that for forty years before the destruction of the Temple, it was drawn with the left hand. Taking a length of crimson wool, the High Priest tied it around the scapegoat's head, whilst he tied a similar cord around the other goat's throat.

The first goat was later killed upon the altar and the blood sprinkled in obedience to Lev.16v5,15. The High Priest would also make atonement for the impurities of the Holy of Holies, the Temple, the Altar etc (Lv.16v16-18,33). However he would not use water for this but would use the blood of the slain animals, for blood represented -

- a life given in exchange for the people's life.
- new life given to the Altar etc.
- the life of the people in God's hands.

The Holy of Holies

The High Priest then prepared to enter the Holy of Holies with the golden ladle of incense and the hot coals from the altar. He entered the Holy Place and parted the curtains leading into the Most Holy Place. He walked north between the curtains and then turned south, walking by the side of the curtain until he reached the place of the Ark of the Covenant, or where the Ark used to be. (It was looted by the Babylonians and lost for all time 2 Kngs 24v13; 2 Chron.36v7)

The chamber, which was completely empty and in total darkness, was lit only by the glow of the burning coals. Within it was a rock three fingers high, known as the Foundation Stone, all that remained of where the Ark used to rest.. The High Priest threw the incense onto the coals and the whole room was filled with the smoke. Following this he withdrew to the Holy Place briefly to pray. The well-being of the people depended on the offerings being accepted by God, and the tension must have been quite overwhelming. From earliest times, bells had been attached to the hem of the High Priest's clothing so that although the people could not see him in the Holy of Holies they would know he was still alive by the sound of the bells as he moved. If he were alive then God must be pleased with the sacrifice. (The sound of the bells also kept the people in touch with his movements and enabled them to join him in worship). Were a disaster to occur and the High Priest to die through judgement or misfortune, a rope was attached to his waist. In this way his dead body could be withdrawn from the Holy of Holies without anyone having to enter it.

The High Priest then took the blood of the bull and returned to the Holy of Holies where he sprinkled the blood upon the Foundation Stone (as he would in earlier days have done upon the mercy seat). He sprinkled the blood once upwards, towards heaven, and seven times downwards. As Adam and Eve, the Ancestors of all mankind, had once dwelt in God's presence, so now the High Priest for a brief moment stood once again "face to face" with God. This was both a message of hope but also of loss – one single day instead of an unending life-time!

Leaving the Holy Places once more, the High Priest came back to the people. He then killed the goat drawn by the lot "*For to the Lord*", "for the sin offering for the people" (Lev.16v15) and with its blood in a basin returned to the Holy of Holies for the third time. As before he sprinkled the blood and then withdrew. He then sprinkled the curtain with the blood of the bull and goat, mixed the contents of the two bowls together and sprinkled the golden Altar of Incense in the Holy Place. He then poured the remainder of the blood upon the corner of the Great Altar outside, where it flowed into the Kidron brook (where the mixed blood and water of the Temple sacrifices was sold as manure to gardeners).

The Scapegoat -the Azazel (Lev.16v10, 20-22)

Then the High Priest put his hands upon the head of the *Azazel*, or *scapegoat*, making confession over it on behalf of all the people.

The name *Azazel* derives from a word meaning "removal" or "cut off".

There are four possible (and perhaps overlapping) interpretations concerning the meaning of this name.

- It was the name given to the goat, *Ez*, and *Azel* - "that goes away". i.e. a description of what actually happened to the animal.
- The place to which the goat was sent in the wilderness. A land of "cutting off" or a "cut off" place, for example a deep gorge or a high mountain, from which it was impossible for the animal to return to the city, or perhaps a place where its life was cut off.
- A name synonymous with Satan, so this would be a demonstration that God had removed the people's sins and sent them back to their source. However could this not easily be misunderstood as being an offering to Satan?
- A symbol of the people's sins, taken away and never to be seen again, in the spirit of e.g. Psalm 103v12.

Both the slain animal and the scapegoat were seen as one sacrifice (Lev.16v5), which of course is a significant insight into the death of Christ. He who was the One who died to bear the *penalty* of sin and also the One who was made sin in order to *remove* sin from us (Rom.3v21-26; 5v8-11; 2 Cor.5v17-19,21).

With the High Priest remaining in the Temple, a priest would lead the *Azazel* through the Nicanor Gate and the Court of Women and through the eastern Shushan Gate in Solomon's Porch. This was the only time in the year that the Shushan Gate was opened. Over an arched bridge spanning the Kidron Valley the goat was led away into the wilderness as the people shouted "Bear [our sins] and begone! bear [our sins] and begone!"

During the nation's early nomadic days it had been enough to lead the goat out into the desert and to abandon it there whilst the people moved onwards (Lev.16v22). However for a settled non-mobile community as Israel now was, it would have been disastrous for the scapegoat to be led away, symbolically taking the people's sins away, only for it possibly to find its way back to them. Therefore by the time of Jesus a different system had been evolved.

An eastward course was established leading in the direction of the Dead Sea. The distance between Jerusalem and the place of the scapegoat's destruction was divided into ten intervals, each half a Sabbath's day journey apart (i.e. about 3/4 of a mile) and marked with standing stones. At each interval an escort (for ceremonial purposes but also to act as protection against any interference and as witnesses to the destruction of the scapegoat), was posted to take the priest and goat on to the next station. At each stopping point a priest with a white flag was also stationed. The priest accompanying the scapegoat was allowed to stop to eat and drink at any of these staging posts should he choose, before continuing on his journey, which was designed to end at the time of the evening sacrifice in the Temple.

From the final post the priest went on alone, observed at a distance by his escort. The man and the goat came to the edge of a precipice. The priest removed the cord and divided it - half tied between the horns of the goat and half tied to a projection in the rock. The goat was then led backwards to fall to its death on the rocks below. So sin was taken away from the people through one sacrifice, the death of a victim in the Temple (the first goat) and in the sending away of sin in the destruction of the scapegoat.

The Red Cord

A tradition arose of also tying a portion of the red cord to the door of the Temple before the *Azazel* was sent into the wilderness. Popular belief had it that the sash turned from red to white as the goat was killed, a sign that the sacrifice had been accepted by God and that the people had been forgiven (cf Isa.1v18). The Talmud records four ominous signs that occurred some forty years (i.e. around the time of Jesus' crucifixion) before the destruction of the Temple.

1. the lot selecting which goat should be "for the Lord" was not drawn in the High Priest's right hand.
2. the scarlet cord which was tied to the door of the Temple stopped turning white after the scapegoat had been driven over the cliff edge.
3. the westernmost light on the Temple candelabra refused to burn. It was from this light that all the other lights on the candelabra were ignited.
4. the Temple doors opened by themselves. The rabbis saw this as an ominous fulfilment of God's word in Zechariah 11v1. Is this latter event also a memory of the events recorded in Matt.27v51

The Final Moments

Once the scapegoat had been killed, the message was swiftly relayed to the waiting crowd at the Temple, signalled by means of the white flags waved by the priests at each of the ten stations. On learning of the death of the scapegoat, the High Priest entered the synagogue in the Temple grounds and began the reading of the Torah, portions of Lev. 16 and 23v26-32, and then reciting from memory Num. 29v7-11, passages that referred to the Day of Atonement.

After completing the readings and pronouncing eight blessings, the High Priest, now dressed in his splendid high-priestly robes, officiated at the evening sacrifices and entered the Holy of Holies for the last time to remove the fire pan and incense ladle. Later that night he would host a lavish banquet for the highborn priests and aristocrats of the city. A custom also grew up that on that night the young women of Jerusalem, dressed in white so all should have an equal advantage, went out into the vineyards where the young men waited to seek out a suitable wife.

A day of great and sustained tension found a fitting end in joy, laughter and celebration. Yet it also became a custom to drive the first supporting stake of the *sukkah* (for the Feast of Tabernacles) into the ground to show that the cycle of Feasts still continued.

Jesus and the Day of Atonement

There is a tantalising comment in John 1v29, where John the Baptist says that Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”. We know that John was baptising at the southern end of the Jordan river, some 25 miles or so from Jerusalem (Jn.1v28; 10v40). He was thus ministering close to the place where the *Azazel* met its death. It is generally assumed that the phrase “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” cannot refer specifically to the Day of Atonement because a goat was used on that occasion and not a lamb. Thus it is assumed that John is amalgamating a general idea about the sacrifice of an animal as a sin offering rather than making a specific reference to the Day of Atonement.

However there is some evidence to suggest that “Lamb of God” is a rabbinic expression for *any* sacrificial animal not just a sheep. Certainly the term used for the sacrificial animal of Exodus 12v3 - 4 is the Hebrew word *seh*, literally *head of [small] stock*, and which can equally mean a lamb or a kid, a sheep or a goat. “The Hebrews.. seem to have regarded any distinction between sheep and goats as a minor subdivision.” (Cole: Exodus - Tyndale OT commentary). Moreover the Greek for “sheep” *probaton*, is at times used to describe other animals, including both goats and cattle. In which case could it be that John is using “Lamb of God” explicitly to allude to Jesus as the scapegoat, the *Azazel*, the offering which takes away not now simply Israel’s sin but the sin of the whole world? And is he doing this in an area only some 10 miles to the east of where the scapegoat would be slain? (And of course mention of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb would inevitably take his hearers to Isa.53v4-7, which may also be John the Baptist’s intention).

The great High Priest - Heb.9v7-28

The writer to the Hebrews also picks up the theme of the Day of Atonement. Unapologetically mixing his metaphors, he presents Jesus as simultaneously both the High Priest and as the sacrificial victim.

In the same way that the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place with the blood of the sacrifice, so Jesus entered into the real Most Holy Place, Heaven itself, to present the blood of the sacrifice, which was His atoning death upon the Cross. “So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people..” (Heb.9v28). In fact,

And so the writer takes the person and ministry of the High Priest and his specific function on the Day of Atonement, and applies them to Jesus, who has become the greatest of High Priests.

- No mere mortal but the Son of God Himself (4v14).
- His priesthood is of the order of the priest-king Melchizedek – earlier and greater than that of Aaron and of Levi (5v6; 7v1-10).
- It inaugurates a new and greater relationship with God – a new covenant (7v12,22; 8v6ff; 9v15; 10v1).
- Jesus’ High Priesthood is directly ordained by God and is not dependant on any human ancestry (5v4-6; 7v14-17,21).
- He presents a greater sacrifice to God – His own blood (9v11-14; 10v19).
- He comes into the actual presence of God, the true Holy of Holies (4v14; 6v19; 8v2; 9v12, 24-25; 10v19).
- His is a once and for all atonement for sin (5v9; 7v27; 9v12,25-28; 10v1-3,11-12).
- His sacrifice of atonement is effective, making the worshipper holy (9v14-15,28; 10v1-4,10,14-18).
- His ministry is completed by this once for all offering of Himself (1v3; 8v1; 10v12-13; Ps.110v1).
- Because His ministry is complete and His sacrifice has removed sin, He now is seated, enthroned as priest-king forever(7v27; 10v14,18).
- He gives to everyone free access into the presence of God and thus into the true Holy of Holies (4v16; 9v6-11; 10v19; 12v22-24).