

Day of Atonement

Celebrated in autumn on the tenth day of the seventh month (10 Tishri) the atoning rituals of the annual Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, were central to the maintenance of the covenant relationship between the God of Israel and his people. These rituals provided important categories for early Christians as they reflected on Jesus and the salvific work he performed. While virtually every detail of the day's rite was open to examination, two aspects in particular exercised widespread and enduring influence on Christological, soteriological, ethical, and apologetic reflection: 1) the presentation of the two goats, one to be slaughtered and one to be sent away; and, 2) the distinctive annual entry of the high priest into the holy of holies to sprinkle the sacrificial blood there. The latter element provided a pattern whereby Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension were explained in terms of the ultimate, heavenly Day of Atonement. This correlated with the development of the Christian spiritual cult. The former aspect came to serve as an influential Old Testament type prefiguring Jesus' divine and human natures.

Conceptual and Ritual Background

The primary biblical instructions for the Day of Atonement are found in Lev 16, Lev 23:26–32, and Num 29:7–11. According to Lev 16 the “anointed priest” (later called the “high priest”) must bathe and put on holy linen garments (Lev 16:4). Leviticus 16 indicates that a bull, two goats, one chosen by lot for the Lord and the other chosen by lot for Azazel (Lev 16:7–10), and two rams were offered (a third goat is also offered according to Num 29:7–11). The anointed priest first took incense and blood from the bull and went behind the veil into the inner sanctuary (later called the “holy of holies”). There he sprinkled some of the blood on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant (the *ἱλαστήριον*, *hilasterion*, LXX) and in front of it. He then repeated this process with blood from the goat chosen by lot for the Lord (Lev 16:14–15). After this he placed his hands upon the goat designated for Azazel (the so-called “scapegoat”), confessed the sins of the people, and sent it away alive. A “prepared man” led the goat into the wilderness and released it (Lev 16:20–22). Additionally, the people were obligated to refrain from work and afflict themselves (Lev 16:29–31; 23:26–32; Num 29:7).

During the Second Temple period fasting and confession were understood to satisfy the vague command to “afflict” oneself. The holiday even came to be identified as the “Day of the Fast” (e.g. 1QpHab 11.7–8; CD 6.19; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 2.200) or simply “the Fast” (e.g. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.95; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 1.186; Acts 27:9; see also 11QT 25.11–12; Schiffman, 1998; Josephus, *J.W.* 5.236–37). The traditions of wrapping of scarlet wool around the scapegoat's head, abusing it, and killing it by taking it into the wilderness and pushing it down a steep hill also appear to be practiced during this period, though the evidence is late (*mYoma* 6.4–6; see also *Barn.* 7.7–8; Justin, *Dial.* 40.4; Tertullian, *Marc.* 3.7.7–8). The notion that Azazel was a demon may underlie the depiction in *I Enoch* 10:4–6 of the demon Asael being bound, thrown down

into Doudael in the wilderness upon sharp stones, and being covered with darkness to await the final judgment. This is suggestive of the tradition of leading the goat for Azazel into the wilderness and throwing it down a precipice (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, 85–88).

Use in the Earliest Christian Sources

Paul's depictions 1) of God putting Christ forward as the *hilasterion* (Rom 3:25), 2) of Jesus, perhaps like the high priest in the holy of holies, interceding for believers in God's very presence (Rom 8:34), and 3) of Jesus, perhaps like the scapegoat, becoming a curse (Gal 3:13) or being made sin (2 Cor 5:21; Rom 8:3) hint at the influence of the Day of Atonement in his thinking (Finlan, 2004). More explicit are the references to Jesus as a propitiation (*ἱλάσμο/ς*, *hilasmos*) for sins in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10, particularly in light of the themes of purification, confession, and Jesus' heavenly intercession in the near context (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, 205–206). Yom Kippur may also underlie the Markan and Matthean accounts of Barabbas being set free while Jesus is condemned to death (so Berenson Maclean, 2007; Stökl Ben Ezra, 2012, 179–184). The Epistle to the Hebrews, however, is unique in the New Testament in drawing sustained connections between Jesus and the holiday. Hebrews links the death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly session of Jesus with the high priest's act of sprinkling blood in the holy of holies. Jesus is presented as the great high priest who ascended through the heavens (Heb 4:14, 7:26), entered the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 8:1–2), and approached God in order to present his redemptive offering (Heb 9:11–14, 24–28). By appealing to the process of the blood rituals on Yom Kippur, the author develops a Christology and corresponding soteriology that understand Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension in terms of the high-priestly activity in the earthly holy of holies (Moffitt, 2011, 43, 297–303). The linkage of this sequence of events with the process of the Yom Kippur rituals becomes determinative for early Christian reflection on Lev 16.

Developments in the Second through Fourth Centuries

Much of the 2nd century Christian literature that explicitly refers to some facet of the Day of Atonement does so to apologize for Christian claims about Jesus and to polemicize against Jews. *The Epistle of Barnabas* (*Barn.* 7.3–11), Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* (*Dial.* 40.4), and Tertullian's *Against Marcion* (*Marc.* 3.7.7–8) and *Against the Jews* (*Adv. Jud.* 14.9) all contain similar appeals to Yom Kippur. Each refers to the holiday in terms of its fast (*Barn.* 7.3; *Dial.* 40.4–5; *Adv. Jud.* 14.9). Curiously, while Lev 16:27 prohibits eating any of the goat for the Lord (see also Heb 13:10), both *Barn.* and Tertullian claim that a goat was to be eaten by the priests while everyone else was to fast (*Barn.* 7.4; *Marc.* 3.7.7; *Adv. Jud.* 14.9). The solution may be to identify this goat with the additional goat offered for sins according to Num 29:11 (so Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, 150). According to *Barn.*, the priests were to eat the entrails of this goat with vinegar (7.4). This prefigured Jesus being given vinegar and gall on the cross. The fasting and mourning to be observed by everyone else prefigured Jesus' suffering (7.5). Tertullian states that the priests

in the temple were to eat the goat itself while the people outside fasted. This symbolized Jesus' glorious return when the Church will feast on the Lord's grace while those who are outside will fast from salvation (*Marc. 3.7.7; Adv. Jud. 14.9*).

The presumed likeness between the two goats distinguished by lots was linked to Jesus' two advents. *Barn.* connects the scapegoat being cursed, abused, having red wool wrapped around its head, and being cast into the desert with the treatment of Jesus during his passion (7.7–9). When Jesus returns crowned and wearing a scarlet robe the Jews will recognize him as the very one whom they mocked, abused, and crucified (7.9–10). Here *Barn.* invokes the likeness of the goats, though he does not clearly explain how Jesus' return resembles the goat offered to the Lord (see Carleton Paget, 1994, 137–138). Justin and Tertullian more explicitly develop this point. Both claim the scapegoat prefigured his first advent. Thus, he was abused and killed/sent away. In his glorious return he will be recognized as the slaughtered goat whose blood has dealt with the sins of those who belong to him.

Origen, following Hebrews' lead, offers sustained reflection on the Day of Atonement in his *Homilies on Leviticus*. In homily nine he explores the ways Jesus is like the individuals who handle the two goats—the high priest, who offers the blood sacrifice, and the “prepared man,” who leads the scapegoat into the wilderness. The earthly holy of holies represents the heavenly space where God dwells most fully. Thus, the entry of the high priest into that earthly space points forward to the time when the incarnate Son would enter the heavenly reality. The latter event occurred when the resurrected Jesus ascended into heaven dressed, like the levitical high priest, in the holy garments of his resurrected body (*Hom. Lev. 9.2.26–32*). Origen points to the singular nature of the annual blood offering as a figure for the duration of the present age during which Christians await Jesus' return. The blood rituals on the Day of Atonement provided a key for interpreting the temporal space between Jesus' ascension and his return. Just as the people waited for the high priest who left them once a year to enter God's presence in the holy of holies, so Jesus, after his time among the people, left them and went once into heaven (*Hom. Lev. 9.2.22–25; 5.85–98*). There he now ministers for his people before the heavenly altar, in the very presence of the Father. The end of this “true Day of Atonement” (*verus dies propitiatonis; Hom. Lev. 9.5.54*) will occur when Jesus returns. This will mark the completion of his atoning work and the end of the present age (*Hom. Lev. 9.5.107–112*).

When Origen turns his attention to the “prepared man” who led the scapegoat away he reflects on Jesus' crucifixion and descent into hell. Drawing on Col 2:14–15 and Eph 6:12 Origen identifies the cross as the place where Jesus triumphed over the powers and principalities of this world, whom Origen dubs “the lot of the scapegoat.” In his death he led these malevolent forces away into the ultimate wilderness of hell (*Hom. Lev. 9.5.26–33, 42–50*). Returning from that wilderness, his earthly work completed, he rose from the dead and ascended to the heavenly altar to perform his high-priestly work (*Hom. Lev. 9.5.51–54*). Thus Jesus' blood has made peace for

things in heaven and things on earth (Col 1:20; see *Hom. Lev.* 1.3–4 for a slightly different account). While now dated, Gustav Aulén’s well-known claim that the “classic Christian idea of the Atonement” in the Fathers holds incarnation and redemption firmly together particularly by highlighting the victory of Jesus over the evil powers in his death and in his resurrection (Aulén, 1931; similarly Young, 1979) captures an essential aspect of Origen’s use of the Day of Atonement.

Origen’s claims about the heavenly offering of Jesus directly relate to his understanding of the universal priesthood of believers and the spiritual sacrifices Christians are to offer. Because Jesus now serves as the great high priest in heaven, Christians can participate in the spiritual cult. The practice of Christian virtues in every church becomes the incense that fills Jesus’s hand and that he offers in the heavenly holy of holies (*Hom. Lev.* 9.8). Deeds such as martyrdom, love of others, and mortification of the flesh all become spiritual sacrifices offered by every individual upon the outer altar of the church only then to be taken behind the veil and offered by Jesus in heaven (*Hom. Lev.* 9.9, see also Daly, 1982, 875–876).

Origen’s tenth homily chastises Christians who observe Yom Kippur by fasting together with the Jews (see also *Hom. Jer.* 12.13). The homily presupposes continuing observance of at least some Jewish holidays and practices by at least some Christians (see Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, 74–75, 273–283). Unlike homily nine, Origen here compares Jesus to the goat chosen by lot for the Lord and offered on account of sins. Barabbas, he suggests, is akin to the goat that was sent into the desert. Pilate is likened to the prepared man who first washed his hands to purify/prepare himself and then released Barabbas (*Hom. Lev.* 10.2.24–44). Christians ought to eschew the Jewish fast observing instead the fasts that please God—abstaining from sins (similarly, see Justin, *Dial.* 15.1–7; 40.4). His reflection on the Day of Atonement, and indeed on Leviticus in general, help solidify the role of cultic categories for Christian ethical and moral discourse (Wilken, 1995, 90).

A somewhat different approach may be seen in Cyril of Alexandria. Cyril looks to the goats offered on the Day of Atonement as types of Jesus’ salvific death, resurrection, and ascension, as well as of his divine and human natures (see his 41st letter [*PG 77*] and his *Glaphyra on Leviticus* [*PG 69*]). He is concerned to demonstrate that the scapegoat had no connection with a demon (*PG 69*, 585, 588; *PG 77*, 204–205, 208). Whereas interpretation in the 2nd and 3rd centuries tended to reverse the order of the events detailed in Lev 16 (connecting the expulsion of the scapegoat with the initial event of Jesus’ crucifixion and the offering of the slaughtered goat with the subsequent events of Jesus’ resurrection, ascension, heavenly session, and return), Cyril finds significance in the order of the rituals as given in Lev 16. The crucifixion was the moment where Jesus, like the first goat, died as the sin offering. As such, he was a sinless substitute for sinners who took God’s condemnation upon himself (*PG 77*, 209, 212). The second goat prefigured Jesus’ subsequent resurrection and ascension since it was sent away alive. Like the scapegoat, Jesus also bore away sins when he ascended to the Father’s presence (*PG 69*,

589; *PG* 77, 212–213, 216). There he intercedes for his people. Clearly, then, the scapegoat was not offered to a demon, for Jesus ascended as an offering to the Father, a place that was previously inaccessible to humanity and so like a wilderness (*PG* 69, 588–589). Thus two successive goats were required in order to represent the full scope of Jesus’ sacrifice precisely because Jesus’ sacrifice involved not only his death, but also his resurrection and ascension (*PG* 69, 588–589; *PG* 77, 208, 220; see Lyonnet and Sabourin, 1970, 276). Cyril further sees Jesus’ two natures prefigured in the two goats. Jesus’ passible humanity is evident in the goat that dies, while his impassable divinity as the Word is prefigured in the goat sent away alive (*PG* 77, 212, 217). Cyril’s linkage of the scapegoat with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and his discussion of the two goats in terms of Jesus’ two natures exercised significant influence on later tradition (Lyonnet and Sabourin, 1970, 279). Interpreters such as the commentary on Leviticus attributed to Hesychius (*PG* 93, especially 991–992; Lyonnet and Sabourin, 1970, 277), Procopius of Gaza (*PG* 87, 747–749; Elliott, 2012, 161), and Theodoret of Cyrus (*Quaestiones in Leviticum*, Question 22; *PG* 80, 328–333) all take similar approaches when reflecting on Yom Kippur’s two goats.

Modern Study of the Day of Atonement in Early Christianity

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the realization that the so-called “parting of the ways” occurred later than generally assumed in past scholarship have helped kindle renewed interest in the Jewish context of early Christianity. Within these larger trends has come new work on the influence of the Day of Atonement. Of particular note in this regard are the studies of Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra (1999, 2003) on the significance of Yom Kippur for multiple aspects of early Christian belief and practice. The importance, as noted above, of the high priest’s entry into the holy of holies as a paradigm for interpreting Jesus’ ascension and current absence from his people in terms of his ongoing high-priestly ministry only becomes clearer in the light Stökl Ben Ezra’s work.

Bibliography

- Aulén, G. *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A.G. Herbert, London, 1931.
- Berenson Maclean, J.K., “Barabbas, the Scapegoat Ritual, and the Development of the Passion Narrative,” *Harvard Theological Review* 100, 2007, 309–334.
- Carleton Paget, J., *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, Series 2, 64, Tübingen, 1994.
- Daly, R.J., “Sacrificial Soteriology in Origen’s Homilies on Leviticus,” *Studia Patristica* 17.2, 1982, 872–878.
- Elliott, M.W., *Engaging Leviticus: Reading Leviticus Theologically with Its Past Interpreters*, Eugene, 2012.

- Finlan, S., *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, Academia Biblica 19, Atlanta, 2004.
- Moffitt, D.M., *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Novum Testamentum Supplements 141, Leiden, 2011.
- Lyonnet, S. and Sabourin, L., *Sin, Redemption, and Sacrifice: A Biblical and Patristic Study*, Analecta Biblica 48, Rome, 1970.
- Stökl, D., "Yom Kippur in the Apocalyptic Imaginaire and the Roots of Jesus' High Priesthood: Yom Kippur in Zechariah 3, 1 Enoch 10, 11QMelchizedek, Hebrews and the Apocalypse of Abraham 13," in J. Assmann and G.G. Stroumsa, eds., *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, Studies in the History of Religions 83, Leiden, 1999, 349–366.
- Stökl Ben Ezra, D., *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 163, Tübingen, 2003.
- Stökl Ben Ezra, D., "Fasting with Jews, Thinking with Scapegoats: Some Remarks on Yom Kippur in Early Judaism and Christianity, in Particular 4Q541, Barnabas 7, Matthew 27 and Acts 27," in T. Heike and T. Nicklas, eds., *The Day of Atonement: Its Interpretation in Early Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Themes in Biblical Narrative 15, Leiden, 2012, 165–187.
- Schiffman, L.H., "The Case of the Day of Atonement Ritual," in M.E. Stone and E.G. Chazon, eds., *Biblical Perspectives: Early Use and Interpretation of the Bible in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 28, Leiden, 1998, 181–188.
- Wilken, R.L., "Origen's *Homilies on Leviticus* and *Vayikra Rabbah*," in G. Dorival and A. Le Boulluec, eds., *Origeniana Sexta: Origène et La Bible*, Leuven, 1995, 81–91.
- Young, F.M., *The Use of Sacrificial Ideas in Greek Christian Writers from the New Testament to John Chrysostom*, Patristic Monograph Series 5, Philadelphia, 1979.

David M. Moffitt