The Scapegoat in Leviticus 16 as a Paradigm of Communal Atonement and Sin Removal in Biblical Theology

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Abstract

This study explores the rituals of the Day of Atonement as presented in Leviticus 16, with particular attention to the roles of the scapegoat (Azazel's goat) and the sin offering. It addresses a key scholarly gap, namely, the limited understanding of how these ritual elements work together to accomplish atonement and shape ancient Israelite identity. The research on the theological significance of the scapegoat clarifies the distinction between the individual and communal dimensions of atonement and carefully examines the linguistic features of the Hebrew terminology associated with the ritual. Employing discourse analysis, the study investigates the text's structure, language, and historical setting, enabling a deeper appreciation of its meaning. Through this approach, it uncovers multiple layers of theological insight embedded in the narrative and demonstrates how these rituals informed Israel's religious thought and practice. The findings show that the ritual operates through a dual process: the sin offering cleanses the sanctuary and restores the sacred space for God's presence, while the scapegoat symbolises the removal of the people's sins, carrying them away into the wilderness. This twofold pattern reveals a rich theology of atonement that holds together both purification and removal, not only individual responsibility but also the collective identity of Israel as a covenant community. In light of this, the study recommends that contemporary interpretations take this dual seriously when engaging themes such as atonement, communal repentance, and the significance

of sacred space. Such an approach offers valuable insight for ongoing theological reflection on sin, purity, and restoration.

Keywords: Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16, Azazel, Scapegoat Ritual, Atonement Theology, Sin Removal

Introduction

The Day of Atonement, also known as *Yom Kippur*, as described in Leviticus 16, holds a central place in ancient Israel's religious life and identity. As the most solemn and comprehensive purification ritual in the Hebrew Bible, it represents the culmination of Israel's sacrificial system and covenant relationship with Yahweh. The ritual outlined in Leviticus 16 addresses both individual and sin, as well as Israel's worldview concerning purity, sacred space, and divine forgiveness. At the heart of this ritual lies the figure of the scapegoat, or, as some translations suggest, the "goat for Azazel," which is both a symbolic mechanism for removing sin from the Israelites. This unique ritual element, in which one goat is sacrificed as a sin offering, and another is released into the wilderness, introduces interpretative challenges that have intrigued scholars and theologians for centuries.

The dual-goat ritual within the Day of Atonement involves two specific acts with distinct purposes: one goat, the sin offering, is sacrificed to cleanse the sanctuary, while the other, the so-called scapegoat, carries the sins of the people into the wilderness, effectively removing them from the people. Through a careful reading of Leviticus 16, with a primary focus on the Hebrew term *Azazel*, this study examines the linguistic and ritualistic dimensions of the scapegoat. Understanding this ambiguity is crucial to grasping the cosmological implications of the Day of Atonement in ancient Israel's religious thought. Therefore, the Day of Atonement ritual differs from other sacrificial practices in Leviticus, not only in its purpose but also in its execution.

This study examines several vital questions central to understanding the ritual of the Day of Atonement: What is the best translation and interpretation of *the term Azazel* in its ancient Hebrew context? How do the High Priest's ritualistic gestures in Leviticus 16 contrast with other Levitical sacrifices, and what significance do these gestures carry? Why must both a sin offering and a scapegoat be present in this ritual, and what distinct functions do each serve? Lastly, what symbolic roles does the wilderness play as the destination of the scapegoat, and how does this setting contribute to Israel's understanding of atonement? The Day of Atonement ritual stands as an expression of atonement in Israel's sacrificial system, and understanding the roles of the sin offering and the scapegoat reveals a theology through which Israel understood its relationship with Yahweh, the significance of divine mercy and the restoration of holiness within them.

Meaning of the 'Scapegoat/Azazel's Goat'

Leviticus 16 describes the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur)* ritual, in which goats are presented before the Lord. According to Ilona Rashkow, the scapegoat ritual in Ancient Israel involved three main actions: first, the High Priest sacrificed a bull as a sin offering, which was sprinkled in the Holy of Holies. Second, a goat for God was chosen by lot before the bull offering, and its blood was sprinkled in the Holy of Holies, outer shrine, and outer altar. Third, the High Priest confessed the people's wrongdoings to a live goat, which was then escorted into the wilderness. The goat's death was not considered indispensable, as the High Priest could continue with the service without waiting for the goat's death.[1] Milgrom proposes three main views of the concept of ʿ*azazel* within the biblical tradition. The first is the view that characterises the goat itself and is rendered as a 'departing goat', hence '(e) scapegoat'. This is an early interpretation already found in the Septuagint, which

[1] Ilona Rashkow, "Azazel: The Scapegoat in the Bible and Ancient Near East," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* Vol. 51, No. 2, (2023): 85.

translates the Hebrew word in Leviticus 16 as 'for the one sent away' (vv. 8, 10), and 'the goat which is determined for release' (v. 26). The second refers to the goat's destination and means 'a rough and difficult place' or 'precipice.' This interpretation is found in Rabbinic literature.[2]

The syntax in Leviticus 16:8 adds another layer to interpreting ʿ*azazel*. The phrase גּוֹרָל אֶחָד לַיהוָה וְגוֹרָל אֶחָד לַעֲזָאזֵל: translates literally as "one lot for the Lord and one lot for ʿ*azazel*." This parallel construction of ʿ*azazel* with the Lord suggests it functions as an entity or location that counterbalances the sacred. Such a pairing would imply that ʿ*azazel* is not simply a "removal goat" but represents an opposing force or realm that contrasts the divine. This structure has led some scholars to argue that ʿ*azazel* is meant as a specific being or demon to whom the goat is sent, a ritualistic acknowledgement of forces outside of Israel's sacred space. The High Priest's sending the goat "for Azazel" might be a concession to wilderness spirits or chaotic entities, consistent with ancient Israelite cosmology that distinguished between holy and unholy spaces. One goat is designated "for the Lord" and offered as a sin offering, while the second is chosen "for Azazel" or designated as the "scapegoat." Some scholars agree with these concepts but add that the word ʿ*azazel* may refer to a demon, based on the following arguments. Their reasons for this view are that if one goat is directed to a supernatural being, the other should be sent to such a power. If God is a supernatural power, ʿ*azazel* should also have such power. In the text (v 8), the two goats' destinations seem to be contrasted.[3] Theologians believe that the name *Azazel* is a demon or Satan's alternate name. However, Feinberg's 1958 work supported this interpretation, leading most authors to believe that ʿ*azazel* is a specific

[2] Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1–16, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1020–1021.

[3] Mary Douglas, "The Go-Away Goat," in *Rendtorff and Kugler 2003:126.* Baruch Levine, *Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 102.

wilderness demon or Satan himself. Most authors argue that the goat is not a sacrifice to the demon but a curse. One must believe that the second goat was not a sacrifice to hold to a demonological interpretation of the passage.[4] Leviticus 17:7 expressly forbids sacrifices to demons; hence, they interpret the goat as a curse or a mockery. Wenham portrays the action as sending the sins back to the author of sin.[5] However, the passage indicates that the second goat is part of a single sin offering to the LORD, not to any creature. Only a few authors mention the goat's significance as a sacrifice, claiming that the ʿ*azazel* goat could not have been any sacrifice because of the sins ceremonially imputed to it. They claim that God atones for the goat when it is presented before the LORD, which does not fit the sequence of events in Leviticus 16.

Meyrick and Collins note several additional reasons why ʿ*azazel* could not be the name of a demon. First, the name ʿ*azazel* is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, making it not important enough to be held parallel to God's name.[6] Second, there is no adequate etymology to show that ʿ*azazel* is the name of a demon, as mocking or cursing a demon is alien to Scripture and contrary to God's character.[7] Rashkow states there is a lot of misunderstanding about what "ʿ*azazel*" means. Its identity has been suggested by a demon that lives in the woods, a foreign divinity, or an inhospitable physical site. In Leviticus 16:8, when the goats are characterised as one marked for the LORD and one marked for ʿ*azazel*, which is parallel to the LORD, this is usually the basis for interpreting ʿ*azazel* as a foreign deity or a demon.[8]

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[4] Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 288.

[5] Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1979), 234.

[6] Frederick Meyrick and Richard Collins, *Leviticus*, *The Pulpit Commentary* (London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1913), 239–240.

[7] Meyrick and Richard Collins, 239-240.

[8] Rashkow, "Azazel: The Scapegoat In The Bible And Ancient Near East," 85.

Several scholars present parallels from Ancient Near Eastern rituals to provide context for interpreting ʿ*azazel*. Many neighbouring cultures believed that demons or spirits inhabited wilderness areas and that expelling impurities to these regions was a common purification practice.[9] In some rituals, animals or objects believed to carry impurities were symbolically sent to chaotic areas or underworld deities, creating a division between the sanctified and forces associated with danger and impurity. The ritual's specification of the wilderness as the goat's destination, linked to ʿ*azazel* as a wilderness deity or demon, is similar to beliefs in which sins or impurities were symbolically removed from the and "given" to forces representing chaos. If ʿ*azazel* were understood as such a being, then the goat's journey "to Azazel" would signify a ceremonial transfer of Israel's sins to a realm embodying disorder and defilement, separating it from the sacred order of the camp. To fully understand the translation and meaning of the term rendered as "scapegoat" or "goat for Azazel" in Leviticus 16, it is essential to examine both the Hebrew term לַעֲזָאזֵל (ʿ*azazel*) and its context within the ritual of the Day of Atonement. Appearing only in Leviticus 16:8, 10, and 26, the term's interpretation is challenging due to its unique usage and ambiguity in the Hebrew text. The two dominant interpretations, "scapegoat" and "goat for Azazel," suggest different roles for the goat in the ritual and raise questions about ancient Israelite beliefs and practices.

Others believe ʿ*azazel* must be a name, as it parallels God's name in a passage. However, Feinberg argues that biblical

[9] James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, vol. 3 (London: Macmillan, 1900), 1–134.; John Hartley, *Leviticus*, vol. 4, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 238., P. M. Venter, "Atonement Through Blood in Leviticus," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 26, no. 1 (2005): 275–292.; Erhard Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996).; Gabriel M. Setiloane, *African Theology: An Introduction* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publications, 1986).; Simon S. Maimela, "The Atonement in the Context of Liberation Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 39 (1982): 45–54.; S. A. Thorpe, *African Traditional Religions* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1991).

matters are not decided by counting aye votes.[10] William Tyndale may have been correct in his translation of the word scapegoat, but the landslide of authors who state that ʿ*azazel* must be a person hinders his translation. Meyrick and Collins disagree, stating that there is only a weak argument for personification.[11] While there is a *prima facie* likelihood that if one designates a person, the other will likely do the same, this is an incredibly rash assertion, depending on the speaker's or writer's ideas and desires.

The term ʿ*azazel* has been proposed to derive from two Hebrew roots: ʿ*ez*, meaning "goat," and *azal*, meaning "to go away" or "remove."[12] This interpretation gives rise to the meaning of ʿ*azazel* as "the goat that departs" or "removal goat," an understanding that fits the role the goat plays in the ritual, symbolically "carrying away" the people's sins. It refers to a means of 'entire removal'; according to this interpretation, 'for ʿ*azazel*' signifies 'for the entire removal of guilt.[13] The term in Leviticus 16:8 is interpreted as referring to the removal of people's sins. Hester suggests that each goat in the passage represents a salvific act of God, with the goat sacrificed on the altar representing atonement.[14] The ʿ*azazel* goat represents removing guilt from the people, with the translation in Leviticus 16:8 reading "one lot for the LORD, and the other lot for removal." This interpretation aligns with the valid etymology of ʿ*azazel*, which means removed. However, this interpretation is not consistent with the passage's context and grammar. Feinberg suggests that the word ʿ*azazel* points to an agent rather than an abstract act, and it must be an active participle

[10] Charles L. Feinberg, "The Scapegoat of Leviticus Sixteen," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115, no. 460 (1958): 330.

[11] Meyrick and Collins, *Leviticus*, 239.

[12] George Bush, *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Leviticus: Designed As a General Help to Biblical Reading and Instruction* (New York: Dayton & Newman, 1843), 148.

[13] Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible – Leviticus 1 – 16*, 1021.

[14] H. I. Hester, *At Home With the Hebrews* (Liberty, MO: William Jewell Press, 1947), 142.

or participle noun.[15] The context does not readily support the abstract idea of removal, as it is not paired with the idea of atonement.

This etymological reading is the foundation for the traditional English translation "scapegoat," which conveys the goat's function as a symbolic bearer of Israel's iniquities, removed from the camp and thus purging of its impurities. However, the linguistic structure of ʿ*azazel* does not strictly follow standard Hebrew noun formations, casting doubt on this straightforward etymology. Perhaps that is why Frederick and Collins believe that ʿazazel derives from azal, which in turn derives from the Arabic word azala, meaning "removed." However, one must admit that it is dicey to assume an Arabic derivation.[16] This inconsistency has led some scholars to reconsider whether ʿ*azazel* could be a compound word. Instead, it might function as a proper noun, potentially naming a specific being, deity, or geographical location. This interpretation would imply that ʿ*azazel* is not simply "the removal goat" but rather "the goat designated for ʿ*azazel*," pointing to a ritual in which the goat is sent to a distinct entity or location associated with impurity.

The ambiguity surrounding ʿ*azazel* has given rise to a variety of translations and interpretations. In early English Bibles, including the Tyndale Bible and the King James Version, ʿ*azazel* was rendered a "scapegoat," capturing the idea of a creature that "escapes" with Israel's sins. Rashkow states that,

> The Septuagint and subsequently the King James Version translated Azazel as "scapegoat" which is quite suitable for the first half of 16:8 and the first half of 16:10 but not for the second half where it appears to be a place name. Still, the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be

[15] Feinberg, "The Scapegoat of Leviticus Sixteen," 332.

[16] Meyrick and Collins, *Leviticus*, 239.

> sent away into the wilderness to Azazel. Taken as a whole, Azazel has a sense of negativity and desolation.[17]

Modern theologians dismiss Tyndale's translation of ʿ*azazel* as a scapegoat, believing it is a fabrication invented by Tyndale. However, this assumption is ungrounded and far from a truthful description of Tyndale's character. James D. Price describes Tyndale as a literary genius who skillfully reproduced the original Word of God, profoundly influencing English literature.[18] Tyndale's commitment to excellence would have allowed him to determine an accurate translation of the word. Scapegoat, a word still in modern usage to describe a person or thing that takes responsibility or punishment for others, did not exist before Tyndale penned it in his translation of Leviticus 16. Tyndale believed in the etymology derived from dividing עז, meaning "goat," and אזל, meaning "to go away," and he contrived a new English word that encapsulates the original meaning.

Tyndale's etymology is valid and fits the passage's context. Bonar defends the scapegoat as the best translation, claiming it is the "most natural meaning."[19] However, the only weakness in the argument is the grammar and syntax of the passage. Many argue that the construction of Leviticus 16:8 suggests that ʿazazel must be a person, but this view, which counters the scapegoat translation, has some merit. Most theologians believe that ʿ*azazel* must be a name since it parallels God's name in the passage.[20] This translation became widely accepted in English, solidifying the "scapegoat" as one who takes on the transgressions of others and departs. This interpretation, however, relies heavily on the idea of ʿ*azazel* as

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[17] Rashkow, "Azazel: The Scapegoat in the Bible and Ancient Near East," 86.

[18] James D. Price, *King James Onlyism: A New Sect* (Singapore: James D. Price, 2006), 40.

[19] Andrew A. Bonar, *A Commentary on Leviticus* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 303.

[20] Feinberg, "The Scapegoat of Leviticus Sixteen," 330.

a compound word, meaning "goat that departs" or "removal goat."

In contrast, many modern translations, influenced by the Greek Septuagint's rendering of the term as *apopompaios* (meaning "one that is sent away"), opt for "goat for Azazel" rather than "scapegoat." This translation suggests that ʿ*azazel* refers to a destination or entity to which the goat is sent rather than a specific function it performs for the people. ʿazazel may be a distinct being or realm associated with the wilderness, with ancient views on unclean or chaotic spaces where impurities were expelled.

Despite these varying interpretations, the term "scapegoat" in English translations reveals an additional layer of symbolic meaning, the concept of an innocent party taking on the guilt of others. As stated earlier, the term "scapegoat" was first introduced by William Tyndale in the 16th century, derived from the phrase "escape goat," to describe the goat that "escapes" into the wilderness after symbolically receiving the people's sins. While the translation does not capture the whole meaning of "Azazel," it effectively conveys the role of the goat as a substitute, bearing collective guilt and thereby offering relief from sin. The translation and interpretation of "Azazel" inform understanding of the Day of Atonement ritual. If "Azazel" denotes a demonic entity, then the ritual assumes a cosmic dimension, where sin is not only removed but also banished to the realm of evil.

Furthermore, Levine thinks it is consistent with Scripture that demons are opponents of God, and as such the goat designated for ʿ*azazel* is driven into that wilderness, which is described as the abode of demons (Lv 17:7; Is 13:21-22; 34:11-15; Mt 12:43).[21] If "ʿ*azazel*" is interpreted as "the goat that goes away," the focus shifts to the symbolic removal and purification, Israel's collective repentance and desire for a renewed

[21] Levine, *Leviticus*, 102.

relationship with Yahweh. If understood as a desolate geographical location, "ʿ*azazel*" means the separation required to maintain purity and boundaries between sacred and profane spaces. This be supported by Ramban's comments on Leviticus 16:8 when he says, "The Holy One, blessed be He, commanded that on Yom Kippur we dispatch a he-goat into the wilderness to the prince who rules over the areas of destruction ... And the intention concerning the he-goat that is dispatched is not that it be a sacrifice from us to him (i.e., Azazel), God forbid, but rather that we intend to do the will of our Creator who so commanded us."[22] Jewish tradition and many Targumists hold that ʿazazel derives from עֲזָאזֵל (azzel), meaning "rough mountain of God."[23] This position is among the few that mention la (el meaning god) as part of the ʿ*azazel* construction. Those who hold this position would be inclined to say that ʿ*azazel,* in this context, refers to a rocky desert area or a specific precipice of a cliff. This position is one of the few that believe that mentioning אל is part of the construction of ʿ*azazel.*[24] Jewish Targums and commentators have historically interpreted ʿ*azazel* as a specific location or a description of a particular type of place. It is easy to dismiss the idea that a particular location, cliff, or cliff precipice is irrational. It is possible that the Jews killed the goat on a rock close to Jerusalem later on, but it was not the exact spot where Moses did it in the desert in Leviticus 16.[25] According to Rooker in the *New American Commentary*, the wilderness's topography is described, with the word אז standing for "ferocious."[26] Moses used the common term הַמִּדְבָּרָה to describe the desert in the chapter, which suggests that the

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[22] Baruch Levine, *The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation. The JPS Torah commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).

[23] Bush, Notes, *Critical and Practical, on the Book of Leviticus*, 147.

[24] Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 64.

[25] Schwartz, "Two Pauline Allusions to the Redemptive Mechanism of the Crucifixion," Journal of Biblical Literature. 102 (1983): 261.

[26] Mark Rooker, *Leviticus*, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 3A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 216.

context does not support the concept of a wilderness. Even Baruch Levine of the *JPS Torah Commentary* subscribes to the demonic interpretation, which has recently been less popular than the traditional Jewish understanding.[27]

Therefore, the term "ʿ*azazel*" and the scapegoat ritual remain difficult and manifold within the context of Leviticus 16. Each interpretation, whether as a demonic figure, a functional description, or a desolate place, adds depth to the Day of Atonement's message of sin's removal, purification, and reconciliation with the divine. This ritual of sin within the covenantal and the ancient Israelites' understanding of purity, atonement, and the necessity of holiness to maintain the presence of Yahweh among His people.

The Ritual of the Two-Handed Confession vs Single-Handed Rituals

The High Priest places both hands on the second goat, confessing the sins of Israel, which are then symbolically transferred to the animal. The goat is subsequently led into the wilderness, bearing the nation's sins away from the sacred camp (Lev. 16:21-22). According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Over the other, the High Priest confessed the sins of the nation, and it was then taken away into the desert hills outside Jerusalem, where it plunged to its death. Tradition holds that a red thread would be attached to its horns, with half removed before the animal was sent away. If the rite had been effective, the red thread would turn to white."[28] This dual role for the goats serves two separate purposes: one as an offering to purify the sanctuary and the other as a means of removing iniquities. The differing destinies of the two goats support the argument that ʿ*azazel* has a unique purpose beyond what the

[27] Levine, *The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 102.

[28] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Scapegoat: Atonement and Purification," Chabad.org, accessed November 10, 2024, https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1846869/jewish/The-Scapegoat-Atonement-and-Purification.htm.

sin offering accomplishes. The wilderness-bound goat represents a physical and symbolic separation of sin from the Israelites, that *ʿazazel* be more than a mere "scapegoat" and perhaps a distinct destination associated with impurity or chaotic forces outside the ordered, sacred realm of Israel's camp.

The two goats in Leviticus 16 are components of a comprehensive sacrifice, a crucial contextual point that interpreters should not miss.[29] The ritual act of the High Priest laying both hands on the goat for Azazel in Leviticus 16:21 is distinct among the sacrificial rites, mainly because it deviates from the usual single-handed gesture seen in other offerings in Levitical law. On the Day of Atonement, this two-handed gesture is symbolic, signifying the collective transference of Israel's sins onto the scapegoat sent into the wilderness. The High Priest, representing the entire nation, uses both hands to embody the idea of a thorough and inclusive act of transferring guilt, marking a moment of ritual significance unique to the nation's relationship with Yahweh.[30] In the Levitical system, single-handed gestures are the norm in sacrificial rituals, in which the offerer places one hand on the sacrificial animal to identify with it or with their family. These gestures, which appear in burnt offerings, peace offerings, and sin offerings (e.g., Leviticus 1:4; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33), signal a more individual or household association with the sacrifice. For instance, in the sin offering, a single hand placed on the animal signifies the transference of personal or familial guilt or impurity. In the burnt offering, the single-handed gesture expresses individual dedication or consecration to God. This hand placement in regular offerings represents a limited, personal engagement with the sacrifice, in contrast to the scale

[29] Feinberg, "The Scapegoat of Leviticus Sixteen," 322.

[30] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Scapegoat: Atonement and Purification," https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1846869/jewish/The-Scapegoat-Atonement-and-Purification.htm. Accessed November 10th, 2024.

and intensity embodied by the two-handed gesture on the Day of Atonement.

The two-handed gesture, in which both hands are laid upon the head of the scapegoat, is a complete and intensive transfer of the accumulated sins and transgressions of the entire Israelite community; unlike other rituals that involve only one hand, the use of both hands signifies the totality of the transference. Placing both hands on the animal, the High Priest enacts a gesture that represents the comprehensive removal of the nation's iniquities, on the need for a ritual act that is all-encompassing and exhaustive in scope. The use of both hands is a powerful symbol that all sins, in their entirety, are being transferred from Israel to the scapegoat, which will then carry them away from the people. This act suggests that the burden of sin within the community has reached a collective weight that any individual cannot bear but requires a designated intercessor, the High Priest, who acts on behalf of the people. Therefore, the two-handed gesture is the gravity of Israel's sin and the need for a distinct mediator to represent and transfer these sins. The High Priest, in this role, is not merely acting in an individual capacity but as a surrogate for the entire nation, for the collective guilt of Israel before Yahweh. His role here is unique, as he bridges the gap between a sinful people and a holy God, as a conduit through which Israel's sins are ritually separated from them and symbolically removed.[31]

Also, the two-handed gesture communicates a sense of thoroughness and finality in the ritual. Through this action, the High Priest is symbolically gathering all of Israel's sins, both individual and corporate and transferring them onto the scapegoat. This gathering of sins represents a moment of national repentance, in which the High Priest's actions meet the people's need for complete atonement and purification. Unlike

[31] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Scapegoat: Atonement and Purification," https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1846869/jewish/The-Scapegoat-Atonement-and-Purification.htm. Accessed November 10th, 2024.

individual or familial offerings, which typically involve a single-handed gesture symbolising a more limited transference, the Day of Atonement necessitates a full, two-handed gesture to signify the nation's collective repenting and seeking divine forgiveness. This ritual is the unique nature of the Day of Atonement, as it is not merely an individual's atonement but the purging of an entire people. In this act, the High Priest's gesture is a visible reminder of the covenantal relationship between Israel and Yahweh. The two-handed ritual is the High Priest's role as a covenantal representative who stands between God and Israel, embodying Israel's identity as Yahweh's people. Laying both hands on the scapegoat, he signifies Israel's acknowledgement of their sins and the necessity of their removal for the sake of covenantal purity. This act shows the seriousness of their covenant obligations, as the people recognise that ongoing disobedience and impurity require a ritual that addresses the full extent of their sins.

The single-handed gestures in other Levitical rituals, such as those described in Leviticus 1:4 and throughout chapters 3 and 4, represent a more limited, personal engagement with the sacrificial process, involving individual accountability before God. In Leviticus 1:4, for instance, laying a single hand on a burnt offering is a personal act of identification, where the offerer symbolically associates themselves with the sacrifice. This gesture suggests that the individual is dedicating the offering to their needs, whether for consecration, atonement, or to seek divine favour. In doing so, the single-handed act is the offerer's commitment to God, framing the sacrifice as a private plea for reconciliation. Also, in the peace and sin offerings, the single-handed gesture represents a personal acknowledgement of one's relationship with God. The peace offerings (Leviticus 3:2, 8, 13) involve a hand laid on the sacrifice, expressing gratitude, fulfilling a vow, or celebrating a personal blessing. Laying a single hand here conveys a sense of thanksgiving and devotion on a more individualised basis, that these sacrifices are primarily expressions of personal or familial piety rather than acts representing the entire people. In the case of sin

offerings for unintentional sins (Leviticus 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33), the single-handed gesture takes on an additional significance, as it represents the individual's acknowledgement of personal transgression. When an individual places their hand on the animal, it symbolises their acceptance of guilt and desire for atonement.[32] In these offerings, the single hand is a direct connection between the sinner and the sacrifice, individual responsibility for sin and the need for personal reconciliation. This interaction focuses on the offerer's specific sins, differentiating them from the collective sins addressed on the Day of Atonement.

These single-handed gestures capture the personal aspect of atonement in these rites, which stands in sharp contrast to the two-handed ritual of the Day of Atonement. Whereas single-handed gestures signify individual acknowledgement and personal reconciliation, the Day of Atonement is a day of atonement, in which the High Priest represents the entire community. The single-handed rituals are the concept of personal responsibility and individual atonement. Still, on the Day of Atonement, the two-handed gesture broadens the scope to acknowledge the collective sin and the need for purification across all of Israel. This distinction between single- and two-handed rituals is the unique role of the Day of Atonement in Israelite worship. While other sacrifices allow individuals to seek forgiveness and demonstrate devotion, the Day of Atonement goes beyond personal offerings to address the nation's collective guilt.

Dual Functions of the Sin Offering and the Scapegoat/Azazel's Goat

[32] Allan Moseley, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Leviticus* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 171 – 172 kindle edition.

As outlined in Leviticus 16, the Day of Atonement comprises two critical components: the sin offering for cleansing the Holy of Holies and the scapegoat, or Azazel's goat, which is sent into the wilderness. Each element has distinct yet complementary functions within the ritual, the nature of atonement in ancient Israelite religious practice. This duality is essential for understanding the comprehensive approach to sin, guilt, and the purification of the sanctuary.

A vital aspect of the Day of Atonement is the sin offering, which involves the sacrifice of a bull designated explicitly for the purification of the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary of the Tabernacle. This ritual is based on the belief that the sanctuary, as the dwelling place of Yahweh among His people, must be free of any impurities resulting from sin. According to Yaw Adu-Gyamfi, "On this day, and this day alone, the high priest is to enter the Most Holy Place and officiate in the immediate presence of God."[33] Offering a sin sacrifice acknowledges that sin affects individuals and contaminates the sacred space where God's presence resides. The sin offering has several essential functions. First, it provides atonement for the High Priest and his household. This initial sacrifice ensures that the priesthood is purified, allowing the High Priest to fulfil his role as mediator effectively. Adu-Gyamfi explains, "Aaron is to bring near the bull for a purification offering for himself and his household. Before he serves as a priestly representative, his own sin and that of his household must be expiated. Thus, the principle of descending sanctity requires that the high priest's sacrifice be performed before that of the community."[34] The mediator's integrity is crucial to the success of the entire ritual, as it enables the High Priest to act on behalf of the people without becoming personally defiled. Second, the bull's blood is sprinkled in the Holy of Holies and upon the altar, symbolically cleansing the space from the pollution of sin. This

[33] Yaw Adu-Gyamfi, "A Literary and Ritual Analysis of Leviticus 16," *Scriptura* 122, 1 (2023): 7.

[34] Adu-Gyamfi, "A Literary and Ritual Analysis of Leviticus 16," 7-8.

act restores the sanctuary's sanctity, allowing it to serve its intended purpose as a meeting place between God and His people. This is the larger narrative of God's desire to dwell among His people while simultaneously requiring them to uphold His holiness. The purification of the Holy of Holies is not merely a ritual act but an essential element in maintaining the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel. The act of atonement, the significance of holiness and purity in worship, and the need for a clean space where the divine and human interact.

In contrast to the sin offering, the scapegoat has a different yet equally vital role within the ritual. This goat is sent into the wilderness after the High Priest lays both hands upon its head, symbolically transferring the collective sins of Israel onto it. This act carries implications, representing a tangible separation of the nation's sins from the and providing a vivid visual of absolution and the burden of sin being lifted. The scapegoat has several symbolic functions in this context. First, placing the people's sins onto the scapegoat illustrates the transfer of guilt and iniquities onto the animal. This visual representation acknowledges its collective transgressions and the need for a mediator to bear the weight of that guilt.[35] Second, sending the scapegoat into the wilderness symbolises the removal of sin and establishes a sense of distance from the defilement caused by those sins. In ancient Near Eastern thought, the wilderness represents desolation and alienation, the notion that sins are not merely forgiven but eradicated.

Additionally, the wilderness serves as a metaphor for spiritual cleansing and restoration. Sending the scapegoat away from the ritual conveys a sense of a fresh start for them, free from the burdens of their collective transgressions. The scapegoat's separation signifies that, while sin has been acknowledged and dealt with through the ritual, it must also be entirely removed to restore its standing before God. Together, these components

[35] Adu-Gyamfi, "A Literary and Ritual Analysis of Leviticus 16," 7-8.

capture a holistic understanding of atonement that requires recognition, sacrifice, and the active removal of sin to restore the covenant relationship with God. This dual function also shows the depth of Israel's understanding of sin. It is not merely an act that requires forgiveness but a state that necessitates acknowledgement and removal to achieve proper purification.

Theological Implications of Wilderness Expulsion in Atonement

The wilderness is a geographical representation of separation. When the scapegoat is sent away, it symbolically distances itself from its collective sins, thereby restoring the relationship with Yahweh. This act of expulsion embodies the belief that sin, which brings impurity and guilt, must be entirely removed from the midst of the people to allow for reconciliation with the divine. In this way, the wilderness becomes a metaphorical dumping ground for iniquities, signifying that sin cannot coexist with divine holiness. Casting the scapegoat into this barren and chaotic space, the Israelites are making a clear statement: their sins are to be taken far away, away from their lives and the sacred presence of Yahweh, the need for spiritual cleanliness and the renewal of their covenant relationship.[36]

The expulsion into the wilderness is also the ancient practice of purging impurities. In many ancient cultures, including that of Israel, removal from the world was a standard method of addressing defilement. This could manifest in various forms, such as physical exile, ceremonial acts, or other measures to cleanse them from the effects of sin. The scapegoat's journey into the wilderness symbolises a collective acknowledgement of transgressions and a sincere desire for purification. This ritual acknowledges the severe nature of sin and its implications for life, a holistic approach to atonement that involves individual

[36] Richard Beck, "Going Outside the Camp: The Holiness of Standing With the Losers," *Experimental Theology*, accessed November 10, 2024, https://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2012/06/going-outside.

responsibility and accountability. As the scapegoat disappears into the wilderness, it marks a new beginning for the people, the hope and possibility of restoring favour with Yahweh. The ritual allows them to come before God once again in a state of purity, free from the burden of sin. In this sense, the wilderness is a place of separation from sin and a pathway toward spiritual renewal.[37]

The expulsion of the scapegoat into the wilderness is necessary to address sin at both the individual and the collective levels. This ritual illustrates the Israelites' understanding that sin affects both the individual and the collective, necessitating collective atonement. Employing the scapegoat in this manner makes the Israelites experience purification and reconciliation with God to maintain their covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Individual sins accumulate and affect the entire nation, as evident in the High Priest laying both hands on the scapegoat and confessing the people's sins. This act signifies that sin is not merely a personal failing but a concern that requires a united response. The scapegoat, representing the collective sins of the people, is sent away as an acknowledgement of guilt and a shared responsibility for atonement. In this sense, the Day of Atonement becomes a powerful reminder that spiritual health and purity are collective endeavours.

The expulsion of the scapegoat into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) played a vital role in the ancient Israelite understanding of atonement, impurity, and sin. In the ancient Near Eastern worldview, the wilderness symbolised chaos, desolation, and a perceived absence of divine presence. This understanding of the wilderness was shaped by the cultural, religious, and environmental realities of the time. The wilderness was not merely a geographical feature but a symbol

[37] Michael S. Heiser, "The Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16: A Goat for Azazel," DrMSH.com, accessed November 10, 2024, https://drmsh.com/day-atonement-leviticus-16-goat-azazel.

of the tension between order and chaos, civilisation and the untamed natural world. The wilderness was frequently perceived as chaotic, in contrast to the order and structure associated with urban centres and cultivated lands. In ancient cultures, cities were seen as embodiments of civilisation, spaces where social, political, and religious life flourished. They were places where humans harnessed and tamed nature, establishing divine order. In contrast, the wilderness represented a realm untouched by human subjugation or cultivation, evoking fear and uncertainty. This chaotic aspect of the wilderness was its rugged, arid, inhospitable terrain and the spiritual challenges it posed.

The wilderness was frequently viewed as devoid of divine presence. In ancient Near Eastern belief systems, the presence of deities was closely associated with specific locales, such as temples, cities, and sacred mountains, where humans could encounter the divine through rituals and worship. Several biblical scholars assert that one cannot discuss Israel's pattern in isolation from the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) world.[38] The wilderness, lacking such designated sacred spaces, was seen as a realm where the presence of the divine was minimised or even absent. This understanding contributed to the wilderness's reputation as a liminal space, a boundary between the sacred and the profane, where the usual order of divine favour and protection did not apply. Compounding the wilderness's negative connotations was its association with danger and evil. It also depicts the wilderness as a realm inhabited by hostile forces, including demonic entities and wild beasts. This portrays the real threats posed by the untamed aspects of nature, predators, harsh weather, and the challenges of survival in a desolate environment. Therefore, the wilderness was seen as a place of vulnerability, where individuals could easily fall prey to physical dangers and spiritual malevolence.

[38] Willem Boshoff and Eben Scheffler, eds., *Ancient Israelite Literature in Context: The World of the Ancient Near East* (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2000), 23.

Hartley argues that whichever way the name *ʿazazel* is understood in the context of the Day of Atonement, it is a rite of riddance. The use of 'send away' (v 21) for this goat carries the connotation that it had to be removed from the community.[39] This conception was evident in various narratives throughout the ancient Near East, where heroes and prophets were tested or confronted by forces of chaos in the wilderness. Anderson believes that "Israel appropriated a great deal of its sacrificial practice and liturgical language from others…but a profound transformation took place in the process of borrowing."[40]

The notion of the wilderness as a liminal space is particularly useful for understanding its role within ritual practices, including those of ancient Israelites. In anthropological terms, liminality refers to the transitional phase in rituals where participants are in a state of ambiguity and dislocation from their ordinary lives. In this context, the wilderness embodies a threshold where life and death, purity and impurity, and good and evil blur. This space evokes transformation as a backdrop for spiritual encounters and conflict resolution. The wilderness held dual significance for the Israelites: it was both a place of testing and a space for divine encounter. The narrative of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt illustrates this. While the wilderness served as a setting for their struggles, doubts, and disobedience, they also encountered God, receiving the Ten Commandments and establishing their covenant relationship with him. Thus, the wilderness becomes a crucible of transformation, enabling an understanding of divine dependence and identity.

[39] Hartley, Leviticus: vol 4, 238.

[40] Bernard W. Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament* (London: Longman, 1998), 499.

Conclusion

The Day of Atonement offers a powerful window into how ancient Israel understood sin, identity, and purity. At its core is the recognition that sin does not only affects individuals, but it disrupts the entire community and even defiles the sacred space where God dwells. This is why the cleansing of the Holy of Holies was so essential: it reflected the belief that God's presence requires purity if the covenant relationship with Yahweh is to be sustained. At the same time, the sending away of the scapegoat into the wilderness vividly expresses another dimension of atonement, the need not just to forgive sin, but to remove it completely. The goat, bearing the people's sins, symbolically carries them far from the community, demonstrating that true restoration involves both cleansing and separation from impurity. This ritual reveals a deeply communal understanding of sin and reconciliation. Sin is never merely private; it affects the entire nation, and therefore requires a collective response. The implications go far beyond ritual performance. They shape how people understand their relationship with God, their shared responsibility, and their hope for renewal, even in places associated with chaos and abandonment, like the wilderness. In this way, the symbolism of the Day of Atonement continues to speak across generations. It reminds us that accountability is essential, but so is the possibility of restoration. Through these rituals, the Israelites were not simply performing religious duties; they were actively participating in a story of cleansing, renewal, and renewed fellowship with Yahweh. Seen in this light, the Day of Atonement is not only an ancient ritual but a profound theological vision that still resonates today, pointing to themes of redemption, responsibility, and the transforming power of divine forgiveness.

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