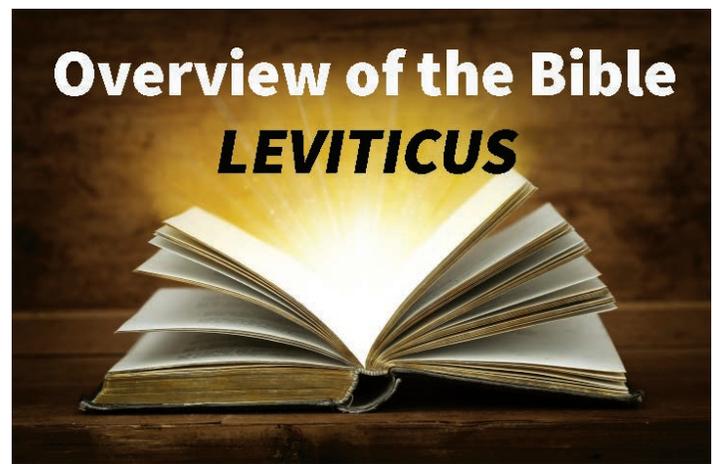


LEVITICUS:  
The Day of Atonement  
*Leviticus 16 – Lesson 22*  
Wednesday, October 7, 2020



One full chapter in Leviticus is given to description of the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 23:26-32, part of a sacred calendar, is a further reference to this particular day, called here *"a day of atonement"* [Yom Kippur]. In rabbinic literature it is simply called *"the day"* or *"the great day."*

The New Testament is similarly brief in the title it uses: *"the Fast"*: *"because even the Fast had already gone by"* (Acts 27:9).

There are two additional pieces of information in Lev. 23:26-32 about the Day of Atonement not found in ch.16. One is that 23:26-32 uses the strongest language possible about consequences for failing to properly observe *the day though fasting and self-denial: "And anyone who does any work during that entire day, such as one I will destroy from the midst of the people."*

To attribute punishment directly to God in the priestly codes is rare. The closest parallel is where the uncommon *"I (God) will cut the person off from the people"* (17:10; 20:3; 5,6) replaces the more common passive form *"that person shall be cut off from the people"* (Lev. 7:20,21,25, 27; 17:4, 9; 18:29; 19:8; 20:17,18; 22:3; 23:29).

The second unique element is the mention in 23:32 that the observance of this day is to last *"from the evening of the ninth day...until the following evening"*; the only special day, including the Sabbath, that the Old Testament so describes. This chronological note provides the background for what became the standard starting time in Judaism for all the holy days: the evening prior to the day itself.

### Aspects of Atonement

Perhaps it is not an accident that the expression *"Day of Atonement"* reads literally in Hebrew, *"day of atonements."* Atonement covers three areas in this chapter: the high priest, the sanctuary and the people.

Through the use of repetition, at least of key phrases, Leviticus 16 emphasizes some crucial ideas. Before anything redemptive can happen, the high priest must deal with his own sins. *"Aaron shall offer...a sin offering for himself...make atonement for himself...a sin offering for himself...has made atonement for himself...make atonement for himself"* (vv. 6,11,17,24). Thus, the phrase *"for himself,"* is used seven times, underscores the absolute necessity that the ranking clergyman first rectify his own errors. That a high priest could be above this requirement would be unthinkable and heretical.

Hebrews 9 tells us that Jesus broke the pattern. He entered once, not annually, into the holy place, and with his own blood, not that of an animal (Heb. 9:11-14). Jesus has no sin to acknowledge and no need to make atonement for himself.

It is interesting to observe that not only people, but inanimate objects as well, need atonement on this day. Compare the following: *"he shall make atonement for the holy place"* (v. 16); *"he shall go out to the altar...and make atonement for it"* (v. 18); *"cleanse it and hallow it"* (v. 19); *"when he has made an end of atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar"* (v. 20); *"he shall make atonement for the sanctuary...for the tent of meeting, and for the altar"* (v. 33).

In every real sense, then, judgment does begin at God's house (1 Pet. 4:17). The sanctuary does need to be cleansed, which Jesus did. Is the Old Testament suggesting here that sin is almost substantival, something that creep into God's presence because of the sins of God's people and wraps itself around the holy vessels in the sanctuary?

The use of the Hebrew verb *kapar*, "to expiate, make atonement," is interesting. Hebrew linguists widely disagree about the nuances implicit in the verb. A moderate suggestion is that the verb means "to rub." Something can be either rubbed off (e.g., sin is wiped off or purged) or rubbed on (sin is covered). It is significant that the Targum of Leviticus 16 are all that have survived, translates the Hebrew word *kapporet* (mercy seat, propitiatory) with the Aramaic word *ksy*, meaning 'cover lid.' Among Hebrew scholars today the preference is for "rub off, remove" rather than "rub on, cover."

## Use of the Blood

In the examination of Leviticus 1-7 we observed the frequent references to blood in the sacrifices of expiation. The one distinguishing fact about Leviticus 16 is that on the Day of Atonement, and only on that day, the blood is carried into the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary of the tabernacle. The biblical phrases are "within the veil...on the front of...and before the mercy seat" (vv. 12-15).

One wonders why on this particular day the blood is carried into the tabernacle's most hallowed precinct. Perhaps the answer lies in a strategic word that occurs in this chapter, "transgression," in vv. 16, 21.

This kind of sin is precisely the opposite of sin committed inadvertently. For this reason, on the Day of Atonement, given to deal with sin in its most gross manifestation, the blood is carried as close to the presence of God as possible. Neither the outer brazen altar nor the inner incense altar will suffice here as the main receptacle for the blood.

Leviticus 16 is the one chapter in the priestly literature in which the word "transgressions" occurs twice in proximity (16:16, 21). The Joseph story provides another instance of this word occurring twice in succession. The brothers of Joseph, claiming to quote their late father Jacob, say to him, "forgive your brothers' transgressions and their sin. 'Now please forgive the transgressions of the servants of the God of your father'" (Gen. 50:17).

As on this day Joseph's brothers sought his forgiveness for their sins of transgression, the Israelites are to seek God's forgiveness for their sins of transgression on Yom Kippur. Joseph is dispatched to Egypt, the scapegoat into the wilderness.<sup>1</sup>

## The Scapegoat

The presentation of the blood of the slain sin offering is one-half of the ceremony of the Day of Atonement. The second half is again unique to this particular occasion. One of the goats for the congregation's sin offering is to be kept alive (vv. 5, 10, 20). Unlike the procedures described in chs. 1-7, in this ritual it is Aaron, not the worshiper, who lays his hands on the head of the goat (v. 21). The officiating priest then "confesses" Israel's sins and transgressions. Again, this is a departure from Lev. 5:5, where the worshiper must "confess" personal sin. The goat then "bears" the iniquities to the wilderness. (The reader should note that the ideas of "to bear or carry" and "to forgive" are covered by the same verb in Hebrew.) This idea of carrying sin away is the antecedent for Isaiah's song about the Suffering Servant, who "has borne our griefs" (Isa. 53:4 RSV) and who "bore the sin of many" (Isa. 53:12 NRSV), and for John the Baptist's exclamation "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29 RSV). The typological significance of this event is expounded in Heb. 6:19-20; 9:7-14.

## The Role of the People

The congregation has played only a minimal role in the ceremonies. Aaron selects the two male goats. Aaron places his hands on the live goat. The other goat Aaron kills as a sin offering for people. Aaron alone enters the sanctuary.

What of the people? Are they passive and uninvolved? Hardly. The point of vv. 29, 31 is that the Day of Atonement is to function as a Sabbath. Not only are the people to abstain from work, but also they are “to afflict/deny themselves.” This certainly does not mean self-laceration or self-flagellation. It means that the Day of Atonement, for the laity, is to be a national day of prayer, fasting, and repentance, a time of ruthless self-examination and transparency. See also Lev. 23:27-32 for the idea of “afflicting” oneself on the Day of Atonement.

The ceremonies in the tabernacle are appropriate and God-ordained, but they become effective only if accompanied by genuine contrition in the community of believers. The Bible nowhere accepts the idea that its rituals are *ex opere operato*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From “*Handbook on the Pentateuch*,” by Victor P. Hamilton, pages 276-277,

<sup>2</sup> From “*Handbook on the Pentateuch*,” by Victor P. Hamilton, pages 278-279,