



Leviticus - Chapter Sixteen

Summary of Chapter Sixteen

Occasioned by the death of Nadab and Abihu, which is recorded in Chapter 10, the prescription sets out how, and for what purpose, Aaron the high priest is to enter the Most Holy Place. The account ends with the institutionalisation of the ritual. The nature of the ritual shows that purification for sins and uncleanness must be done from the innermost part of the tabernacle. All the other purificatory rituals hinge on the ceremony of this day. The sin-offerings in this chapter in particular point to the work of Christ on the Cross.

V. Leviticus 16:1-34 - The Day of Atonement

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the Lord and died. ² The Lord said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy-seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy-seat.

Leviticus 16:1-2

The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron. These verses explain the immediate occasion for the atonement-day ritual, implying that Nadab and Abihu's sin was not simply offering unauthorised fire or being drunk (10:9), but entering or attempting to enter the Most Holy Place, i.e. inside the curtain.

Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain. Therefore, Aaron could not come into the Holy Place any time he pleased, but only at God's invitation and at the appointed time and place.

The same is true today: A person can only come into God's Holy Place at his invitation. Blessedly, the access has been opened wide because of Jesus' work on the Cross for all mankind. Romans 5:1-2 specifically says that because of Jesus' work on their behalf, they have standing access to God.

³ Thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bull for a sin-offering and a ram for a burnt-offering. ⁴ He shall put on the holy linen tunic, and shall have the linen undergarments next to his body, fasten the linen sash, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy vestments. He shall bathe his body in water, and then put them on. ⁵ He shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin-offering, and one ram for a burnt-offering. ⁶ Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin-offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. ⁷ He shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting; ⁸ and Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. ⁹ Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord, and offer it as a sin-offering; ¹⁰ but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, so that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

Leviticus 16:3-10

The preparations and the general guidelines for the atonement-day ritual are now described. Aaron prepares a young bull as a sin-offering and a ram for a burnt-offering, thus atoning for the house of the priests. He also prepares two male goats for a sin-offering and a ram for a burnt-offering, as atonement for the people of Israel. One of the two goats for the people's sin purifies the tent of meeting, while the other is presented alive to be sent away into the wilderness.

He shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin-offering. Aaron must come with two goats and one ram to complete the offering of atonement. This was extensive preparation for an important day. To the ancient Jews the Day of Atonement was called 'the great day' or sometimes even just 'the day.' It was and remains the only day of commanded fasting on the Jewish calendar. Modern Jews still regard Yom Kippur an important day of fasting, soul searching, and righting wrongs, yet they offer no sacrifice for sin.

He shall put on the holy linen tunic, and shall have the linen undergarments next to his body. Aaron must come clothed with garments of humility. Over his

ornate garments for glory and for beauty, described in Exodus 28:2, he wore a holy linen tunic and the linen trousers. He was clothed in simple, humble white.

He shall bathe his body in water. Aaron must come washed. Traditionally, this washing was done by immersion.

The meaning of **Azazel** is uncertain. Many take it to be a proper name, since it is parallel to **the Lord** in v.8, and thus conclude that it is the name either of an otherwise unknown demon or of a place. The traditional explanation is that Azazel, Hebrew 'aza'zel, is a compound word, combining goat, Hebrew 'ez, with 'going away', Hebrew 'azel. The word would then mean 'goat that goes away', hence the conventional translation scapegoat. Each of these explanations has its difficulties; in any event, the idea is clear enough: the goat is sent out in order to take sin away from Israel. There were elaborate Jewish traditions about Azazel, saying he was a demonic being that the Messiah would defeat. More likely, Azazel simply referred to this goat's function of symbolically removing sin from Israel.

Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. The Talmud stipulated that the two goats be as alike as possible: in size, colour, and value. One goat was for the Lord and would be sacrificed as a sin-offering, and one goat would be the scapegoat and would be released to the wilderness. Each goat had an important role on the Day of Atonement.

¹¹ Aaron shall present the bull as a sin-offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house; he shall slaughter the bull as a sin-offering for himself. ¹² He shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense, and he shall bring it inside the curtain ¹³ and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, so that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy-seat that is upon the covenant, or he will die. ¹⁴ He shall take some of the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy-seat, and before the mercy-seat he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times. ¹⁵ He shall slaughter the goat of the sin-offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the mercy-seat and before the mercy-seat. ¹⁶ Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins; and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleannesses. ¹⁷ No one shall be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the sanctuary until he comes out and has made

atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel.

Leviticus 16:11-17

Aaron shall present the bull as a sin-offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. The atonement-day ritual starts with atonement for the priests (vv.11-14) and then moves to atonement for the people (vv.15-17). Aaron puts incense on the fire and it creates, literally, a cloud. The purpose of this act is to make the Most Holy Place misty and foggy to prevent Aaron from clearly seeing the presence of God. This is for Aaron's protection.

When Jesus offered a perfect atonement for sin, he did not need to make a sin-offering for himself: <<For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever>> (Hebrews 7:26-28).

He shall take some of the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy-seat. The blood of this sin-offering had to be sprinkled on the mercy seat, which was the lid to the Ark of the Covenant, which sat in the Holy Place. When he came into the Holy Place, he had to come with a smoking censer that gave off a cloud of incense. According to Jewish tradition, it was on the Day of Atonement that the high priest, and only the high priest, could pronounce the name of God, the sacred Tetragrammaton YHWH. When he entered the Holy Place with the blood of the goat set apart to the Lord, he would utter the name. He was the only one, and that was the only time, when the name could be uttered, and the high priest was to pass on the exact pronunciation of the name of God to his successor with his dying breath.

Before the mercy-seat he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times. The idea was that God was above the mercy seat: <<for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy-seat>> (v.2), and as he looked down upon the Ark of the Covenant, he saw the sin of mankind. Mankind's sin was represented by the items in the Ark of the Covenant: the manna which Israel complained about, the tablets of law Israel broke, and a budding almond rod given as a response to Israel's rebellion. Then, the high priest sprinkled atoning blood seven times on the mercy seat, covering over the emblems of Israel's sin. God saw the blood cover over the sin, and atonement was made. This captures the thought behind the Hebrew word for atonement: *Kipper*, which means, 'to cover.' Sin was not removed, but covered over by sacrificial blood. The NT idea of atonement is that sin is not merely

covered, but removed, taken away through the sacrifice of God's only Son, so there is no barrier between God and man any longer.

He shall slaughter the goat of the sin-offering that is for the people. The goat that was sacrificed was also like Jesus, in that the goat was spotless, was from the people of Israel (v.5), was chosen by God (v.8), and the goat's blood was taken to the Holy Place to provide atonement.

Because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins. Some interpreters assume that this description of sins refers to heinous offenses that have not been dealt with by the rituals on ordinary occasions. However, the emphasis of all their sins appears to require the interpretation that the sins and uncleannesses on the ordinary occasions are once again taken up on this occasion.

¹⁸ Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the Lord and make atonement on its behalf, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat, and put it on each of the horns of the altar. ¹⁹ He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and hallow it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel.

Leviticus 16:18-19

Presumably, altar here refers to the altar of burnt-offering and not the incense altar, the purification of which is implied in v.16b. The blood that has purified the mercy seat purifies this altar, thus restoring it to its pristine condition.

²⁰ When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. ²¹ Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. ²² The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

Leviticus 16:20-22

When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. After the high priest's sin was dealt with and after the tabernacle itself was cleansed, Aaron then dealt with the sin of the people through the transference of sin and release of the scapegoat.

The goat shall be set free in the wilderness. This rite of sending the guilt of all Israel into the desert is commonly understood to be another way of cleansing the people, in addition to the prior purification of the sanctuary (vv.3-20). However, it is possible to see the two rites consecutively, based on the understanding that bearing iniquity or guilt is part of the atonement process. If so, the relationship between the two rites is that Aaron bears the iniquities in purifying the holy objects, as confirmed by: <<***Why did you not eat the sin-offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and God has given it to you that you may remove the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement on their behalf before the Lord***>> (Leviticus 10:17), and then he places them on the Azazel-goat, so that the latter takes them away into the wilderness.

The significance of sending the goat out into the wilderness was not only representative of separation from the people but that the goat would fall prey to wild animals, would die and be consumed along with its transferred sin.

One ancient Rabbi says the goat was taken ten miles out of Jerusalem, and there were refreshment stations each mile along the way for the man who escorted the goat out of the city. He finally went the ten miles and then watched the goat wander off until he could see the goat no more. Then the sin was gone and the Day of Atonement was considered complete.

Sin was put away, but not completely. How could one know for certain that God had accepted the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement? What if someone accidentally encountered the scapegoat in the wilderness? What if the scapegoat wandered back among the people of Israel? Through their traditions, the Jews began to deal with these concerns. On the head of the scapegoat a piece of scarlet cloth was tied, and the tradition of the Jews states that if God accepted the sacrifice the scarlet cloth turned white while the goat was led into the desert; but if God had not accepted this expiation, the redness continued, and the rest of the year was spent in mourning. Through this, they thought to have a certainty about the work of atonement.

It seems that later the Jewish people altered the ceremony so the goat would be killed and have no chance of contacting Israel again. The Jews write, that this goat was carried to the mountain called Azazel, whence the goat is so called; and that there he was cast headlong; and that the red string by which he was led turned white when God was pleased with the Israelites, otherwise it remained red; and they mourned all that year.

And the ancient Hebrews write, that forty years before the destruction of the temple, which was about the time of Christ's death, this red string turned white no more. When Jesus' blood red body rose from the dead, clothed with white garments, it was proof forever that the red had changed to white, and atonement at the Cross was perfect and complete.

²³ Then Aaron shall enter the tent of meeting, and shall take off the linen vestments that he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. ²⁴ He shall bathe his body in water in a holy place, and put on his vestments; then he shall come out and offer his burnt-offering and the burnt-offering of the people, making atonement for himself and for the people. ²⁵ The fat of the sin-offering he shall turn into smoke on the altar.

Leviticus 16:23-25

Then Aaron shall enter the tent of meeting, and shall take off the linen vestments that he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. Aaron leaves his Day of Atonement clothes inside the Holy Place because they are holy. They are not to be worn for the normal activity of the high priesthood. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest was humble (v.4), he was spotless (v.11), and he was alone (vv.11-14), and he emerged victorious, just like Jesus was in accomplishing humankind's work of atonement.

He shall bathe his body in water in a holy place, and put on his vestments. After releasing the scapegoat, the high priest and the one who released the scapegoat washed and the sin-offering and burnt-offering would be completed.

²⁶ The one who sets the goat free for Azazel shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterwards may come into the camp.

²⁷ The bull of the sin-offering and the goat of the sin-offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp; their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be consumed in fire. ²⁸ The one who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterwards may come into the camp.

Leviticus 16:26-28

The one who sets the goat free for Azazel shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterwards may come into the camp. The person who handles the Azazel-goat is assumed to have been defiled, presumably because he had contact with the uncleanness that the goat bore.

²⁹ This shall be a statute to you for ever: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves, and shall do no work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. ³⁰ For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord. ³¹ It is a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall deny yourselves; it is a statute for

ever. ³² The priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the linen vestments, the holy vestments. ³³ He shall make atonement for the sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. ³⁴ This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins. And Moses did as the Lord had commanded him.

Leviticus 16:29-34

On the tenth day of the seventh month or Tishri, i.e. late September, the Israelites and the strangers are to afflict themselves, literally 'afflict or humble their souls'. This term expresses self-denial and self-mortification, connected with fasting and prayer: <<*Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might deny ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our possessions*>> (Ezra 8:21), <<*But as for me, when they were sick, I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting. I prayed with head bowed on my bosom*>> (Psalm 35:13), and: <<'Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?' Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers>> (Isaiah 58:3). This is also a day that the people are not to work; it is a day of solemn rest.

You shall deny yourselves. In contrast to other national days of gathering, the Day of Atonement was a day for the people to deny themselves. That is, it was a day of fasting and rest, a sabbath of complete rest.

Modern Jews who do observe the Day of Atonement or *Yom Kippur* typically fast for that day. Yet they have no sacrifice for sins:

- Some Jews consider their own sacrifice to be a suitable substitute; today some sacrifice a rooster for every male in the family and a hen for every female on the Day of Atonement, a vague shadow of obedience to Leviticus Chapter 16.
- Some Jews consider charity a suitable substitute for sacrifice; the word charity in modern Hebrew is the same as the word for righteousness.
- Some Jews consider sufferings a suitable substitute for sacrifice; among the Jews of Eastern Europe there used to be custom to inflict 39 lashes upon themselves on the Day of Atonement.
- Some Jews consider good works or the study of the law as suitable substitutes for sacrifice.

For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord. God wanted them to afflict themselves

so they could identify with the sacrifice for sin. Afflicting the soul brought the Israelite into sympathy with the afflicted sacrificial victim, even as the believer identifies with Jesus Christ on the Cross.

It is a sabbath of complete rest to you. This Sabbath of solemn rest demanded a cessation of works, even as the believer is justified and finds atonement apart from his own works, being justified by the work of another. This means that all the charity, all the sufferings, all the study of the law in the world cannot atone for sin; the only solution is to rest in the finished work of Jesus Christ undertaken on behalf of the entire human race: <<*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved*>> (Acts 4:12).

Yom Kippur ends with the blowing of the Shofar, the trumpet that heralds the coming of the Messiah. An ancient prayer in a Jewish Day of Atonement liturgy reads:

Our righteous Messiah has departed from us,
We are horror-stricken, and have none to justify us.
Our iniquities and the yoke of our transgressions
He carries who is wounded because of our transgressions
He bears on his shoulder the burden of our sins.
To find pardon for all our iniquities.
By his stripes we shall be healed,
Eternal One, it is time that thou should create him anew!

He shall make atonement for the sanctuary. This meant the priest and only the priest. Only once a year could any man, and then only one specific man, enter into the Holy Place and come near the presence of God.

This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins. To this summary of what was previously described in the chapter is the reminder that this is to be done once a year. Every year, year after year, this atonement had to be made, showing it was never completed. In contrast, Jesus provided a finished work: <<*For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him*>> (Hebrews 9:24-28).