

Yom Kippur

by James D. Nickel

To be understood rightly, the message of the gospel must be seen in the context comprehensive scope and applicability of God's Word, the nature and character of God, the nature and character of man, the nature and consequences of sin, and the nature and consequences of God's "checkmate" on sin. There are many great Bible words that explicate all of these themes. This is a study of one of those words: *atonement*.

The Hebrew word for atonement is *kaphar*. This root forms the basis of the Hebrew expression *Yom Kippur* meaning "Day of Atonement."¹ *Kaphar* means a "covering" or, as a verb, "to cover." Leviticus 16 outlines the procedures surrounding the Great Day of Atonement and *kaphar* occurs sixteen times in this chapter (see also Leviticus 23:27-31 and Numbers 29:7-11).

Old Testament Israel celebrated *Yom Kippur* on the tenth day of the seventh month², five days before the commencement of the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-34). The events of this day recognized that:

"You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel" (Exodus 25:21-22).

- (1) the righteous Law of God *did not have the power to make one righteous* and
- (2) the righteous Law of God detailed a *gracious* provision for unrighteousness; i.e., all the sins of the people of past year could be "covered" by sacrifice necessitating the shedding of blood.³

In the context of law and grace, it is important to understand that all the Old Testament duly ordained sacrifices, including its service of worship, or liturgy, were ordinances of grace; i.e., witnesses to the superabundant grace of God. In the heathen context of the day, i.e., the Baalim culture of the Canaanites, the view of deity was conditioned by a lie; the lie that deity was angry at man and needed appeasement by sacrifice to placate this anger. This view of deity can easily be read into the Old Testament sacrificial schema.⁴ In the Bible, sacrifices never "conciliate" the "anger" of the Living and True God. God is, by nature, love and He loves the sinner (I John 4). His wrath is

¹ The technical transliteration of the Hebrew for "Day of Atonement" is *yom hakkipurim*.

² The seventh month on the Hebrew calendar is Tishri, our October.

³ Despite regular sacrifices (any Israelite could offer a sacrifice for sin any time of the year), some infractions or defilements could still remain unacknowledged. This yearly and general Day of Atonement, designed especially to cover sins unatoned for and uncleansed during the course of the year, met this exigency.

⁴ This view of deity can be easily read into the New Testament sacrifice schema, too.

Yom Kippur

by James D. Nickel

revealed in Scripture as His compassionate action of love set against that which ravages man made in His image, i.e., against ungodliness and unrighteousness (Romans 1:18).

It is the witness of Scripture that God loves the world of sinners (John 3:16). Before He created the cosmos, He determined to populate it with holy and blameless sons of adoption, a family who would share His Trinitarian likeness, i.e., the interpenetrating and self-giving love known from eternity within the members of the Godhead (Ephesians 1:3-5). When the mystery of sin entered the world (Genesis 3; II Thessalonians 2:7), it placed an obstacle in the way of this divine blessing. Breaking God's commandment enveloped man in a world of guilt (Genesis 3:10). The broken law cried out for justice to be satisfied because the "soul that sins shall die" (Genesis 2:17; Ezekiel 18:20). Also, the domain of disgrace, the conscience contaminated by sin, needed to be assuaged, wiped clean. God established the Old Testament liturgical system as a witness to His grace, as a means to satisfy the demands of His broken law so that He might lavish His mercy upon man on the basis of justice satisfied. Unlike the pagan liturgy of Baalim, the bloody Old Testament animal sacrifices never placated God. These offerings were a means of grace that publicly displayed God's love for the sinner by wiping out their sins for the renewal of familial fellowship.

Let's return to the liturgy of the Day of Atonement. In preparation for this great day, the people of God were commanded to fast.⁵ The day was also a high Sabbath⁶ (a Sabbath of the Sabbaths) incorporating in its observance: (1) a day of rest from normal work activities; i.e., no normal work for the purpose of generating individual profit, (2) a day of gathering together for sacrifice and worship, and (3) a day for works of necessity and mercy (see Isaiah 58; I Samuel 21:1-6; cf. Matthew 12:1-14). It is also significant to note that when the Jubilee⁷ year arrived, it was to be announced with a trumpet sound⁸ on this day (Leviticus 25:9).

The focal point of this feast involved the main participant; i.e., a man from the tribe of Levi called the High Priest. He was just like any other Israelite, a sinner before the eyes of God, yet his office called for him to act as the representative of the nation, i.e., one for the many. In his person, he carried the whole nation into the Holy of Holies; i.e., the manifest presence of God.

The Holy of Holies, or the most holy place, was a small enclosure within the Tabernacle-Temple construct. Its dimensions (length, width, and height) were equal; i.e., it was built as a perfect cube. A curtain or a veil (Exodus 26:31-33) separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place.⁹ There was only one piece of furniture in the Holy of Holies: a box-like structure called the Ark of the Covenant. It was constructed of acacia wood, a strong wood that never rotted, and gold. Placed inside this box were three items (cf. Hebrews 9:4): (1) a piece of manna, (2) Aaron's rod that budded, and (3) the tables of the Testimony; i.e., the Commandments. The lid of the box was made out of pure gold and called "the mercy seat."¹⁰ Two cherubim¹¹ with wings were hammered out of this gold. They faced each other looking down on the mercy seat and their wings covered the mercy

⁵ Fasting was such an integral part of the day that, in the New Testament, this feast was identified as "the Fast" (see Acts 27:9).

⁶ A high Sabbath is a day that "acts as the Sabbath" even if the day is not the calendrical Sabbath.

⁷ God's law revealed His superabounding and gracious character by not only commanding one day of rest every seven days, but also for one year of rest every seven years and one extra year of rest every 50, or Jubilee, years.

⁸ That trumpets announce the Jubilee is a Hebrew "play on words" because Jubilee means to "sound forth."

⁹ Three pieces of furniture were located in the Holy Place: (1) The Golden Altar of incense (Exodus 30:1-6), (2) The Golden Lampstand (Exodus 25:31-40), and (3) the Table of Showbread (Exodus 25:23-30).

¹⁰ The transliteration of the Hebrew for "mercy seat" is *kapporeth* meaning "atonement cover."

¹¹ Cherubs are not rosy-cheeked, chubby little angelic waifs. They are heavenly winged creatures, fearsome and majestic, who are clothed in what appears to be fire and speak in thunderous overtones (Ezekiel 1, 10).

Yom Kippur

by James D. Nickel

seat. Above the mercy seat and between the wings of the cherubim was the Shekinah¹² Glory – the visible and localized presence of God in a cloud (cf. Exodus 13:21-22; Psalm 105:39; Exodus 40:34-38; II Chronicles 5:13-14; Leviticus 9:23-24; Isaiah 4:2-6). Scripture identifies this locale as the earthly manifestation of the presence and throne of God (I Samuel 4:4; II Samuel 6:2; II Kings 19:15; Psalm 80:1; 99:1-2). It is the mercy seat, the place where the God of glory reveals His mercy to the sinner, which is the crux of the Day of Atonement.

As mentioned, the High Priest is the divinely appointed representative of Israel, bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh. Everything he does on this day, Israel, the many, does in him, the one. This representation is two-fold: (1) In himself, he represents God to the people and (2) the people to God. By his actions on this day, he brings God's word of mercy, grace, and love to the people and, as one for the many, he confesses the people's sins and then bears witness to God's judgment on sin by killing a sacrificial animal and by sprinkling its blood on the mercy seat.



Let's summarize the events of this day. First, the High Priest prepares himself by removing his official and glorious accouterments; i.e., his turban with the inscription "holiness to the Lord" on a golden plate, a blue robe fringed with bells and pomegranates, a shorter tunic, the ephod, tied with a girdle, and the symmetrical twelve-stoned breastplate carrying the names of the tribes of Israel (Exodus 28). After bathing, he clothes himself with an ordinary white, linen robe; i.e., the holy garments.

Second, as a sinner himself, he offers a sacrifice, a bullock as a sin offering and a ram as a burnt offering, for his own sin, and his household, on the Brazen Altar (cf. Exodus 30:28).¹³ Then, he takes a censor full of burning coals from the altar and two handfuls of incense and enters the Holy of Holies. Inside, he creates a "smoke screen" by mixing the burning coals with the incense. This smoke shields him from the certain death that would result from unmediated exposure to the manifest presence of God radiating above the mercy seat. *God, in His ultimate essence, remains an unknown mystery to finite man.* Thus protected, he brings the blood of the bull into the Holy of Holies and sprinkles it once against the face of the mercy seat and then seven times in front of it.

Third, after offering this sacrifice for himself and his household, the High Priest takes two unblemished goats that were as identical as possible. He casts two lots over the two animals, one *for Jehovah* (or *Yahweh*)¹⁴ and the other *for the scapegoat*.¹⁵ He lays his hand on the goat *for Jehovah* and then leans his whole body against it showing his identification with the animal. As he does this, he confesses the sins of the people over the goat; i.e., the goat effectively becomes polluted with the sins of the people. Because the wages of sin is death, the goat is put to death. The death of this animal represents the death of all the people; i.e., one for the many. The High Priest then drips the

¹² Shekinah means "to dwell."

¹³ This altar was located in the "Outer Court." All the people of Israel could see what happened on the Brazen Altar. The only other piece of furniture in the Outer Court was a bronze laver (Exodus 30:18) that was used for ceremonial washings.

¹⁴ Yahweh means "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). God is the being whose essence is existence, i.e., who essentially exists, or who cannot not exist. God is. He is the sheer act of "to-be" itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*). He is existence itself. Without Him, nothing can exist.

¹⁵ This second goat was called *Azazel* meaning "an entire removal" or "scapegoat."

Yom Kippur

by James D. Nickel

blood of the dying goat into a basin and walks into the Holy Place. Out of sight of the people, he passes through the veil and sprinkles the blood of the goat on the mercy seat. After sprinkling the blood, the High Priest stands only for a moment in God's manifest presence signifying that he and the people he represents can stand in righteousness before a holy and loving God.

Fourth, the High Priest confesses the sins of the people over the scapegoat and hands this animal over to a member of the Levitical priesthood. This Levite escorts this goat outside the camp, before the sight of all the people, and then lets it go to get lost in the surrounding wilderness. The purpose of this scapegoat action is to show an individual Israelite that his sin is covered; i.e., "as far as the east is from the west, He has removed transgression from you" (Psalm 103:12).

Fifth, to end the day, the High Priest, with raised hands, puts God's name on the people by blessing them in grace and peace (Number 6:24-27):

"The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

Yom Kippur only could provide temporary "covering" of sin. Every detail of the events of the day cried out for permanent resolution. First, the High Priest was a sinner like everyone else. This office was based entirely on family genealogy, not on character. Hence, some High Priests profaned the office¹⁶ and the good ones, being mortal, died. Second, the offering of the goats was amoral; they had no choice in the matter of offering their lifeblood. In his sense, all the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament were portends of a final, permanent sacrifice. Third, the High Priest could only stand "for a moment" in the manifest presence of God and he will be back, doing the same thing again, next year. What about David's desire to dwell in the presence of God continually (Psalm 23:6)? Fourth, how can God truly manifest His holy presence permanently in a material house? Since God is Spirit, where, then, is His abiding dwelling place? And finally, since sin requires death and bloodshedding for its effective expiation, on what immutable basis then can man truly approach the manifest presence of God? The answers to these questions can only be found in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, *the High Priest of a New Order*.

¹⁶ Those who profaned their office profaned the sacrifices (cf. Amos 5:21-24).