

Leviticus 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 06 April 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 16. The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the Lord and died. And the Lord said to Moses, Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. But in this way Aaron shall come into the holy place, with a bull from the herd for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering. He shall put on the holy linen coat, and shall have the linen undergarment on his body, and he shall tie the linen sash around his waist, and wear the linen turban. These are the holy garments. He shall bathe his body in water, and then put them on. And 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. Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. Then he shall take the two goats, and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for Azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord, and use it as a sin offering. But 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 sent away into the wilderness to

Azazel. Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself. And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small. And he shall bring it inside the veil, and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die. And he shall take some of the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat, on the east side. And in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times. Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat, and in front of the mercy seat. Thus he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleanness. No one may be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the holy place, until he comes out, and has made atonement for himself, and for his house, and for all the assembly of Israel. Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the Lord, and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood of the bull, and some of the blood of the goat, and put it on the horns of the altar all around. And he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it, and consecrate it from the uncleanness of the people of Israel. And when he has made an end of atoning for the holy place, and the tent of meeting, and the altar, he shall present the live goat. And 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. And he shall put them on the head of the goat, and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness. Then Aaron shall come into the tent of meeting, and shall take off the linen garments that he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. And he shall bathe his body in water in a holy place, and put on his garments, and come out, and offer his burnt offering, and the burnt offering of the people, and make atonement for himself and for the people. And the fat of the sin offering he shall burn on the altar. And he who lets the goat go to Azazel shall wash his clothes, and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. And the bull for the sin offering, and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be carried outside the camp. Their skin, and their flesh, and their dung shall be burned up with fire. And he who burns them shall wash his clothes, and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. And it shall be a statute to you forever, that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves, and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins. It is a sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves. It is a statute forever. And the priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the holy linen garments. He shall make atonement for the holy 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. And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel, once in the year, because of all their sins. And Aaron did as the Lord commanded Moses. The day of atonement, or more properly the day of covering in Leviticus chapter 16, is at the very heart of the sacrificial system. It's at the centre of

the book of Leviticus, and of the Pentateuch as a whole. It's a solemn sabbath, or maybe the sabbath of sabbaths. It's a ritual of cosmic significance, and its place within the Pentateuch maybe suggests its importance. It's a day of forgiveness, a day of judgment, and a day of drawing near to God. And it represents, among other things, the great awaited day of the Lord, the day where all things are set right in the cosmos. It occurs nine days after the Feast of Trumpets. In Leviticus chapter 25, verses 8 to 10, we see it's also the beginning of the year of Jubilee. It's a time of restoration of all things. It's a time of judgment, and it's a time in which God draws near to his people.

The point of it is drawing near. A sort of drawing near that was lost at the fall, and that failed in the actions of Nadab and Abihu, who drew near on their own terms. This, in fact, is a direct response to the death of Nadab and Abihu, presumably on the same day. It's not just a response to Nadab and Abihu in particular, though. It's about the uncleanness of Israel more generally. And in the previous chapters, that uncleanness has been described in considerable detail. Going back to Genesis chapter 3, which I've already argued is a paradigm for thinking about what takes place in the actions of Nadab and Abihu, the fall of man recapitulated, we can notice a correspondence between the judgments upon the serpent and the human beings and the actions of God towards them with chapters 11 to 16 of the book of Leviticus. So chapter 11 concerns forbidden foods and also concerns judgment in the animal realm on the basis of the animal's connection with the dust. The serpent is condemned to crawl on his belly and eat dust, and the animals associated with the serpent in Leviticus chapter 11 are unclean and not to be eaten. In chapter 12, there's the laws concerning childbirth corresponding with the judgment upon the woman in Genesis chapter 3. And then there's the judgment upon the man and death. In chapters 13 to 15, there are the laws for skin disease, expulsion from the house, as the leprous house is to be torn down. And then there is also the laws concerning bodily emissions, the body as a site of uncleanness. And then that leads into chapter 16. That gives a background for understanding why the uncleanness of Israel is such a problem. This chapter then, seen against the backdrop of Eden, gives us a sense of what's taking place. Man is re-entering the presence of God, getting nearer to the presence of God than ever before. This is akin to Moses going up

Mount Sinai and spending time with the Lord there. And here is a ritual that ensures the communication and fellowship between God and his people on a yearly basis. Adam is re-entering the presence of God after the fall. Now we speak of the day of atonement typically, but a better understanding would be the day of covering. When we talk about covering, you could think about covering for someone.

[8 : 33] You stand in their place, maybe you pay their bill at the restaurant. It can also be associated with clothing. And in the story of Eden, there is covering given after all of these other events have taken place, after the fall, after the judgments, and as they're about to be expelled.

God gives them covering. And in the same way, in the day of covering, God gives his people covering. And that covering enables them to come near to God, to have fellowship with God. Animals symbolically substitute for man. Although that substitution is limited, they can substitute to a degree.

As a symbolic substitute, an animal could go into God's presence, being taken up in smoke into God's presence, as a substitute for the worshipper. The worshipper knew that that was what God required of him, and he could offer the animal as a symbolic substitute for himself. There's also a particular part of the tabernacle furniture that is important on this day. The covering of the Ark of the Covenant, commonly called the mercy seat, but connected with the same word and concept of covering.

Just as God covered the shame and nakedness of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, so God covers the transgressions and the iniquities of his people, so that they can draw near to him. God then is providing a way for people to come near to him. In a way that Nadab and Abihu failed, God is opening up a route. And this is also a rebooting of the system. The system absorbs impurity over the period of the year, and something needs to be done to expel that, to drive out the impurity from the system.

It's a sort of have-you-tried-turning-it-off-and-on-again day. It's a day where things are rebooted and set back to their original state. What the Day of Atonement involves, in effect, is an intense purification offering.

[10 : 21] It's an extreme purification offering, and the mourning and the fasting of the people is associated with that. Whatever is not cleansed during the year is dealt with in this one fell swoop on the Day of Covering.

It's the only time in the year that Aaron would go into the Holy of Holies, and that nearness to God is found with the forgiveness. He must strip himself of his clothes of glory and beauty, and bathe and wear simple holy linen garments. He offers a bull as a purification sacrifice for himself.

He's defiled by his own sin, and also the sin of the people, and he must open up a way for himself to enter into the presence of God with the blood rite of the sin offering, or the purification offering.

He brings the blood into the Holy of Holies. The only time he goes into the Holy of Holies is on this day, and he brings it with a cloud of incense. Now Nadab and Abihu brought in incense to the presence of God, and were destroyed with fire from the presence of the Lord. Now Aaron takes incense in a censer, and he uses coals from the fire before the Lord from the golden altar of incense, and puts incense on that altar as well. This creates a cloud of incense that, as he goes into the Holy of Holies, will go up above him and shield him, as it were, from the presence of God's glorious cloud.

He then sprinkles the blood of the bull that was offered as the purification offering for himself upon the mercy seat seven times. This is followed by the rite of the goats, and there are two male goats taken as a sin offering for Israel, a sin or a purification offering. Now those two goats belong together. They're both goats for a single sin offering, but there's a division between them.

[12 : 04] There's a pairing of the goats. Now we see two rams used for the ascension offering later on, but those aren't a pair of rams, as these goats are. These two goats belong together. They're a pair, and one of them has one fate, the other has another fate, and they're divided by lot. There's nothing about the goats themselves that justifies their division. It's merely that division by lot, and it's to highlight that these two belong together as part of a single rite.

I spoke earlier of the Day of Atonement, or the Day of Coverings, as an intensified purification offering. And this helps us to understand what's taking place here. These two goats belong together, they're divided from each other, and they are both used to perform the sin offering. One performs the sin offering in an intense way for the people, but the other goat bears those sins that cannot be dealt with by the purification offering itself, by expelling those from the camp. That goat is for Azazel.

It belongs to the defiled place. Maybe Azazel is seen as some sort of demon of the wilderness, Satan in the wilderness. I've suggested elsewhere that this might help us to understand Christ being expelled into the wilderness after the people confess their sins in John's baptism, and Christ goes out to meet Satan in the wilderness. The wilderness is the demonic realm, the realm of chaos and disorder. It's a realm that is empty and unformed. It's returned to the original chaos of the creation. Aaron performs a similar blood ritual with the goat for the purification offering.

The goat on which the lot fell for that. And he brings the blood into, again, the Holy of Holies and sprinkles it on the covering. And he also sprinkles it, or places blood upon the horns of the golden altar of incense in the holy place. Then he goes out and puts blood on the horns of the brazen altar in the courtyard. Blood of the bull that he offered for himself, and then also blood of the goat that was offered for the people. Once he's done all this cleansing, he deals with the other half of the goat purification offering. He takes the goat upon which the lot had been cast for Azazel, and confesses the sins and iniquities and transgressions of Israel over it. This isn't just for regular impurities. It also deals with the high-handed sins and rebellions of Israel.

And it was an association of Israel with that goat. Israel is associated with the goat, as Aaron's hand is placed upon it, and he confesses Israel's sin. It's a symbolic substitute. Israel should see itself going out into the wilderness, being expelled from the camp on the basis of its sins. Ordinary purification offerings were burnt up in a clean place outside of the camp, and this happens with the bull and the goat of the purification offerings on the Day of Atonement. But the goat for Azazel is expelled into the unformed and empty waste of the wilderness. It vanishes, as it were, into the maw of chaos. It's returned to the deep, the abyss. High-handed sins have no sacrifice for them, but they could be reduced in status by repentance. And this sacrifice, this whole procedure, this ceremony, dealt with the high-handed sins that hadn't been dealt with anywhere else. All those things that were left over and impure, standing between God and his people. The people are called to afflict themselves on this day, to confess their sins and to afflict themselves. And it's an important part of the ritual that we don't usually think about enough. The rituals of the sacrifices were not intended to be mechanical or magical, to just turn a lever and have the result that you want. God could reject sacrifice. Sacrifices more generally, and the Day of Atonement more particularly, involved a ceremony in which people's hearts were called to be involved. They were called to draw near with their hearts, not just in these symbolic substitutes.

[15 : 58] Now, doing the ritual properly really mattered. As we see with Nadab and Abihu, if you do it wrongly, you could even lose your life. The ritual really changed something. It really changed something about God's relationship with his people. But that ritual required a corresponding state of heart.

It had to be confirmed in Israel's afflicting of itself for their sins. Now, we can think of this in terms of any sort of ceremony. If you had a wedding ceremony and then went on as if nothing had happened, the wedding ceremony isn't magic. Rather, the wedding ceremony is an invitation and encouragement and framework within which everyone is taught how to act differently. After the wedding ceremony, no one acts in the same way again. Bride and bridegroom are no longer just two people who love each other very much, their husband and wife. And everyone else around them treats them differently.

The state treats them differently. Their neighbours treat them differently. Their families treat them differently. The man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two become one flesh. That's an amazing thing for a ceremony to perform, but never performs it in a purely objective way, like turning a handle and suddenly, poof, man and wife, irrespective of how everyone lives or fails to live in terms of that. This then is the case for the sacrificial system too. Animals symbolically substitute for man, but they can't ultimately deal with sins. The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins, as the author of Hebrews makes clear. Something more is needed. The animals will not a helper suitable to man. Analogies can be drawn between man and the animals, and they can symbolically substitute for him, but they cannot truly substitute for him. This ritual then, among other things, anticipates a greater dealing of sin, a greater day of atonement, a day when those things that cannot be cleansed by the blood of bulls and goats will be cleansed by blood greater than that.

A question to consider. One of the curious features of the law in scripture is the way that the law often can connect with narrative. In the book of Genesis, I believe there are a number of stories that anticipate the day of atonement in different ways. I think that two of these are found in the story of Jacob and Esau, and also in the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis chapter 38. What are some the parallels that you can see between these stories and the day of atonement, and are there any other such stories that you notice in scripture? How can the ritual of the day of atonement help us to read these stories better?