



The “A” Word

THE VAST AND RICH THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

SUNDAYS IN LENT

ATONEMENT

Atonement means that two parties, estranged from each other because one of them offends the other, eventually reconcile. It usually contains two stages:

- 1) the offender's act of expiation for forgiveness from the offended party, and
- 2) reconciliation, which is a regained state of unity thereafter.

Atonement in this sense, whether the offended party refers to a deity in the divine-human relationship or a fellow human person in the interpersonal relationship, seems to exist in every culture and every religion, although the word "atonement" itself (comprised of two parts, "at" and "onement") was coined in Christendom by William Tyndale, the maker of the 1526 English Bible.

This new word is a synonym of "propitiation" and "expiation".

EARLY JUDAISM

“For [Jacob] thought, ‘I may appease [Esau] with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me’” (Genesis 31:21 NRSV).

“Let me placate (atone, propitiate) him with the tribute that goes before me, and after I shall look on his face, perhaps he will show me a kindly face” (Robert Alter).

“Placate” in Hebrew means literally “cover his face” (presumably his angry face), to “show me a kind face,” an idiom that denotes forgiveness, is literally “lift up my face” (presumably my fallen or dejected face).

Notice that in this atonement story there are no priests or blood sacrifices and no sense of atonement with God.

HEBREW BLOOD SACRIFICE

For the ancient Hebrews blood sacrifice was a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim the moral condition of the presenter would be modified. The sacrifice established a relationship between the realms of the sacred and the profane through the mediation of the ritually slain victim, which acted as a buffer between the two realms (Hubert and Mauss).

The sacrifice could also be understood as a gift. It was an old idea that humans made a gift to the god but expected a gift in return. But in giving it is not merely an object that was passed on but a part of the giver, so that a firm bond was forged causing power to flow both ways connecting the giver and the receiver (Mauss).

JEWISH PRIESTHOOD

The most common biblical term for "priest" is the Hebrew word *Kohen* (pl., *kohanim*), a West Semitic term known in other ancient societies. Although a primitive noun, not derived from any verbal root, its meaning can be established from context. The term *levi* (pl., *leviyyim*) is often used to designate certain types of priests, and has eluded precise definition, but is translated as "Levite." It seems to be a North Israelite term for "priest" in its earliest biblical occurrences.

The cultic function of priests required them to officiate in the public sacrificial cult, a role for which only they were fit. They also prepared the sacrificial materials and examined the sacrificial animals.

YOM KIPPUR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Leviticus 16: 1-34

Just months after the people of Israel left Egypt (1313 BCE), they sinned by worshipping a golden calf. Moses ascended Mount Sinai and prayed to G-d to forgive them. After two 40-day stints on the mountain, full Divine favor was obtained. The day Moses came down the mountain was to be known forevermore as the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur.

That year, the people built the Tabernacle, a portable home for G-d, which was a center for prayers and sacrificial offerings. The service in the Tabernacle climaxed on Yom Kippur, when the High Priest would perform a specially prescribed service, service including the offering of incense in the Holy of Holies (where the ark was housed) and the lottery with two goats—one of which was brought as a sacrifice, the other being sent out to the wilderness (Azazel or scapegoat).

K-P-R (כ-פ-ר) OR YOM KIPPUR

Traditionally understood to mean “to cover” on the basis of the similar Arabic root *kaphara*, which means “cover” or “conceal”.

Kapporeth (mercy seat) received its name from its role as a “cover” of the ark of the testimony which represented the presence of God with His people, for His power went with them wherever they took the ark (Joshua 3:6).

Theologically *kippur* involved the covering over of human sin through the ritual of the sin offering.

Contemporary scholars connect *K-P-R* with the Syriac term *kephar* (meaning to wipe away) and the Akkadian term *kuppuru* (meaning to wash away or erase).

SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD

The Torah portrays Yom Kippur primarily as a day centered almost exclusively upon the Temple in Jerusalem. It was on this day that the high priest performed the complicated rituals and sacrifices that purified the Temple from the defilement that had attached to it as a result of the sins of the Israelite people. (They believed this defilement had caused God's presence to depart from their midst.) There also was another aspect to the day: *atonement*, the spiritual cleansing of the people themselves. Their role was to serve as an attentive and expectant audience outside the Temple precincts, awaiting the hoped-for successful outcome of the high priest's service, to abstain from work, and to practice "self-denial" (fasting and refraining from certain other activities that satisfied their physical needs).

CONTEMPORARY YOM KIPPUR RITUALS

Like Shabbat, no work is to be done on Yom Kippur, from the time the sun set until the stars come out in the evening of the next day.

As affliction the following five actions are avoided: wearing leather shoes; eating or drinking; applying lotions or creams; washing or bathing; engaging in conjugal relations.

The day is spent in the synagogue, where five prayer services are held.

It is a day dedicated to introspection, prayer and asking G-d for forgiveness. Even during the breaks between services, it is appropriate to recite Psalms at every available moment.

The closing service ends with the resounding cries of the Shema prayer: "Hear O Israel: G-d is our L-rd, G-d is one." Then the congregants erupt in joyous song and dance after which a single blast is blown on the shofar followed by the proclamation, "Next year in Jerusalem."

A festive after-fast meal follows, making the evening after Yom Kippur a *yom tov* (festival) in its own right.

DAY OF ATONEMENT AND PASSOVER

The error of conflating atoning sacrifice and Passover sacrifice

In the Exodus account the Israelites were required to follow God's command rather than be automatically spared as in prior plagues. If they were obedient, the angel of death would Passover their households. The lamb was thus not an "atoning" sacrifice for the sins of the Israelites, but rather simply offered in obedience to God's command.

The idea of the paschal lamb atoning for sin cannot be found in Jewish scriptures, but it was alluded to long before the exodus from Egypt. Abraham's faith was tested when God commanded him to sacrifice his beloved son.

A VIEW FROM A TORAH-OBSERVANT CHRISTIAN

Passover symbolizes the first steps new believers take when coming out of spiritual Egypt and accepting Yeshua as their Savior. It focuses on God's people preparing to enter the millennial kingdom under the Messiah.

Yom Kippur pictures the blood of the Lamb covering the sins of the individual and the corporate sins of the nation of Israel and points to the time when Yeshua will return to regather the lost of Israel and prepare to marry his bride (redeemed Israel).

COMING UP

ATONEMENT AS...

3/5: INCARNATION

3/12: CHRISTUS VICTOR

3/19: DIVINE LOVE

3/26: RECONCILIATION