

# Leviticus 16 - The Day of Atonement and its meaning

## Introduction

The typological framework of the Old Testament serves as a foundational blueprint for understanding the complex narrative of cosmic redemption unveiled throughout the New Testament. Among all the statutes, ceremonial ordinances, and appointed feasts given to ancient Israel at Mount Sinai, none carries a weightier or more solemn theological significance than the Day of Atonement, known in Hebrew as Yom Kippur. Formally codified in the sixteenth chapter of the Book of Leviticus, this single day stood at the absolute zenith of the Hebrew sacrificial economy. It was the only day of the year when the high priest could venture past the thick, heavy veil of the Tabernacle into the Holy of Holies, entering the literal terrestrial presence of the Almighty shining above the mercy seat. The rituals performed on this day were not merely repetitive, sterile religious actions meant to maintain civic order; they were a comprehensive, living prophecy written in blood, steps, and shadows.

The primary objective of the Day of Atonement was twofold: first, to effect a absolute structural cleansing of the sanctuary, the priesthood, and the entire congregation from the cumulative spiritual defilement generated by a year's worth of sins; and second, to completely eradicate the very presence and memory of those transgressions from the midst of the camp. To achieve this, the divine mandate required two distinct animal vehicles acting in perfect tandem—two healthy goats chosen by lot. One goat was designated 'for the Lord,' to be slain as a blood sacrifice, while the other was designated 'for Azazel,' or the scapegoat, to be laden with the sins of the nation and exiled alive into a barren, uninhabited wilderness. It is within the structural mechanics of these two goats that the grand arc of biblical salvation is perfectly mirrored.

While the broader Christian theological consensus has historically and accurately recognized the first goat as a flawless foreshadowing of Jesus Christ's substitutionary death on the cross, the ultimate prophetic assignment of the second goat—the scapegoat—demands a closer, more comprehensive examination. When aligned with the chronological patterns of the prophets and the final visions of the Apocalypse, a deeper revelation emerges: the scapegoat represents the final, cosmic accountability of Satan. In this narrative framework, Christ completely fulfills the role of the slain sacrifice whose blood washes away and legally redeems mankind, while Satan, the original author and deceptive instigator of all rebellion, fulfills the role of the scapegoat who must eventually bear the ultimate liability for introducing sin into the cosmos. This detailed narrative will explore Leviticus 16 in rigorous detail, contrasting the earthly sanctuary shadows with the heavenly realities expounded in the Epistles, and demonstrating how the final dramatic

fulfillment of the Day of Atonement is unsealed in the final movements of the Book of Revelation when the ancient serpent is exiled forever.

## **The Earthly Sanctuary Shadow: Leviticus 16 In Detail**

To comprehend the vast cosmic scope of this prophecy, one must first step directly into the physical courtyard of the Mosaic Tabernacle. The text opens with a stark reminder of divine holiness and the inherent danger of approaching the unapproachable God carelessly. The LORD speaks to Moses immediately following the tragic deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, who had offered 'strange fire' before the presence of God and were consumed. The operational boundaries for the high priest are strictly established from the outset:

*"And the LORD said unto Moses, Speak unto Aaron thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the vail before the mercy seat, which is upon the ark; that he die not: for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat."*

The high priest could not simply walk into the Holy of Holies whenever he felt a personal desire for communion. The access was fiercely restricted to one singular calendar date: the tenth day of the seventh month. Before Aaron could even begin the ceremonies for the collective nation, he was required to undergo an exhaustive process of personal purification. He had to wash his entire flesh in water and put aside his ornate, golden high-priestly garments—the breastplate of judgment, the ephod, and the beautiful blue robe. Instead, he clothed himself in holy garments made exclusively of plain white linen. This stark white attire signaled a posture of absolute humility, purity, and transparency before the Creator. He was required to bring a young bullock for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering to make immediate atonement for himself and his own household, ensuring that the mediator himself was legally spotless before attempting to mediate for millions.

Once the personal cleansing of the priesthood was established, Aaron turned his attention to the congregation of Israel. The commandment required him to take from the collective assembly two kids of the goats for a sin offering, alongside a single ram for a burnt offering. These two goats were brought directly to the door of the Tabernacle of the congregation. It is at this crucial intersection that the divine selection mechanism was introduced:

*"And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the LORD, and the other lot for the scapegoat. And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the LORD'S lot fell, and offer him for a sin offering. But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness."*

The casting of lots was an explicit declaration that human judgment, preference, or bias had no part in determining the destiny of these animals; the decision belonged entirely to the sovereign determination of God. The two goats, while physically identical in appearance, were separated unto two diametrically opposed structural roles. The first goat, upon which the lot 'for the LORD'

fell, was immediately prepared for execution. Its lifeblood was shed at the bronze altar in the outer courtyard. The high priest then took a censer filled with burning coals of fire from off the altar, filled his hands with sweet incense beaten small, and stepped behind the heavy veil. As the fragrant smoke filled the Holy of Holies, covering the golden mercy seat, Aaron sprinkled the blood of the slain goat with his finger upon the mercy seat eastward, and before the mercy seat seven times. This ritual was repeated with the blood of the bullock. Through this shedding of blood, the internal sanctuary was legally cleansed from the accumulating spiritual uncleanness of the people.

However, the ritual was only half-completed. The sanctuary had been cleansed, the legal penalty of sin had been paid by the blood of the first goat, and God's justice was completely satisfied. Yet, the sins themselves still conceptually remained at the tabernacle door. This sets the stage for the dramatic entrance of the second goat—the scapegoat, or Azazel. The text outlines a remarkable legal transaction that takes place exclusively over the head of this living animal:

*"And when he hath made an end of reconciling the holy place, and the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar, he shall bring the live goat: And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness."*

This was not a sacrificial killing. The scapegoat's blood was never shed on the altar, and its body was never burned with fire. Instead, it served as a living repository. Through the physical imposition of the high priest's hands and the audible confession of every rebellion, iniquity, and transgression of the nation, the collective guilt was structurally transferred to the head of this goat. A specially designated individual—termed a 'fit man'—was then charged with a singular mission: to lead this goat deep into a barren, desolate, completely unpopulated desert wilderness. Once deep within this uninhabited land, the fit man let go of the goat, leaving it to wander in absolute isolation, separated from the camp of God's people forever. The sins were not merely covered; they were physically removed from the community and returned to the wilderness waste.

## **The True Sacrifice: Hebrews 9 and 10 Contrast Christ with the First Goat**

To fully understand why the scapegoat cannot represent a savior, we must look to the New Testament commentary provided in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Chapters 9 and 10 serve as an extensive legal analysis contrasting the repetitive, animal-based shadows of Leviticus with the final, glorious reality of Jesus Christ's high-priestly ministry. Hebrews explicitly locks Jesus into the role of the first goat—the sacrifice whose blood grants true, unhindered access to the heavenly throne room of God.

The author of Hebrews begins by pointing out the inherent structural limitations of the earthly Tabernacle system. The high priest's entrance into the Holy of Holies was an annual, highly restrictive event that served as a constant reminder that the ultimate way into the absolute presence of God had not yet been fully opened. The blood of goats and bulls could provide a legal, external purification for the flesh, keeping the covenant community functioning, but it was utterly powerless to transform the human conscience or permanently eradicate the sin nature. The contrast between those ancient animal shadows and the superior ministry of Christ is stated with profound clarity:

*"But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"*

Jesus Christ did not bring the temporary blood of an animal into a physical room made of wood, gold, and fabric. He brought the infinite merit of His own sinless blood directly into the cosmic reality of heaven itself. Furthermore, Hebrews draws a massive contrast regarding the frequency of the offering. The Levitical high priest had to stand daily and return annually on Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement) with fresh blood, a process that proved the old sacrifices never truly solved the underlying problem of human guilt. If those animal offerings had truly perfected the worshippers, they would have ceased to be offered. Instead, there was a mandatory, terrifying remembrance of sins brought to mind every single year. Christ's work, however, is characterized by absolute finality:

*"For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect... But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins... By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God;"*

The posture of Jesus sitting down at the right hand of the Father is a vital theological point. In the earthly Tabernacle, there were no chairs provided for the priests; their work was never done, and they had to remain standing, constantly ministering. Christ's act of sitting proves that His sacrifice as the true 'First Goat' was perfectly completed, totally sufficient, and legally ironclad for all eternity. He paid the entire debt of human sin. Therefore, for the believer who accepts this

substitutionary sacrifice, their transgressions are completely washed away, and their standing before God is made perfect. This leaves absolutely no room for Jesus to fulfill the role of the scapegoat, because the scapegoat does not die to cleanse anyone—it is an exiled bearer of raw liability.

## **The Cosmic Banishment: Revelation 20 and the Scapegoat's Fulfillment**

If Jesus Christ perfectly and completely fulfilled the first goat through His death and heavenly ascension, the prophetic timeline demands an answer for the second goat. When does the high priest place the confessed sins upon the head of the live goat and exile it into the wilderness? The answer is unsealed with stunning chronological precision in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Revelation. This text maps out the final resolution of the cosmic conflict at the conclusion of human history, directly mirroring every mechanical step of the Leviticus 16 ritual on a universal scale.

To understand this connection, one must examine the linguistic and historical identity of the word 'Azazel.' In ancient Hebrew thought and intertestamental writings, Azazel was recognized not as an abstract concept of escape, but as a personal name for a powerful fallen angel—the demonic author of rebellion who introduced sin to humanity. When Leviticus 16:8 states that one lot is 'for the LORD' and the other 'for Azazel,' the parallel grammar strongly indicates that if the first lot belongs to a personal divine entity, the second lot must belong to a personal adversarial entity. Thus, the scapegoat ritual represents a cosmic act of ultimate justice: after God's people are fully redeemed and cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, the ultimate liability and guilt for the existence of sin is sent back to its original source, Satan. Revelation 20 opens immediately following the second coming of Christ with a dramatic cosmic arrest:

*"And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season."*

The structural parallels here are undeniable. The angel descending from heaven with the chain functions precisely as the 'fit man' outlined in Leviticus 16. Just as the fit man was chosen and empowered to seize the live scapegoat at the Tabernacle door, this powerful angel is commissioned to apprehend the great dragon, the ancient serpent who has deceived the entire world. The destination of this banishment is likewise identical. The scapegoat was sent into a 'land not inhabited,' a completely barren, isolated wilderness devoid of human presence. Satan is cast directly into the 'bottomless pit'—an abyss of total darkness, chaos, and absolute confinement. During the thousand-year millennial reign of Christ and His saints, Satan is forced to wander this cosmic wilderness in total isolation, completely stripped of his ability to tempt,

deceive, or interact with humanity. The instigator is forced to carry the weight of his rebellion alone.

The prophecy reaches its final, irreversible climax at the end of the millennium. The scapegoat was never allowed to return to the camp of Israel; its exile was permanent, ensuring that the sins of the people were buried forever in the deep desert waste. Revelation 20 reveals the final, eternal execution of this cosmic banishment after Satan is loosed for a short season to manifest his final, unchangeable rebellion:

*"And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever."*

When the devil is cast into the lake of fire, the prophetic pattern of the Day of Atonement is completely realized. He is not cast into the fire as a holy sacrifice to save anyone; he is cast there as the ultimate vessel of wrath, bearing the final, crushing accountability for the existence of evil. He carries his own iniquities, his deception, and his rebellion away from the camp of the redeemed permanently. With the author of sin safely locked away in eternal destruction, the universe is finally, structurally cleansed, paving the way for the New Jerusalem to descend into a creation where sin is remembered no more.

## Conclusion

The detailed examination of Leviticus 16, through the interpretive lenses of Hebrews and Revelation, uncovers a beautiful, highly coordinated tapestry of divine justice and redemption. The Day of Atonement was never a primitive ritual designed to appease a fickle deity; it was an intricate prophetic roadmap sketching out the entire trajectory of salvation history from the cross to the final judgment. By separating the destinies of the two goats, God provided a brilliant legal distinction between the payment for sin and the ultimate liability for sin.

Jesus Christ stands forever as our glorious High Priest and the perfect fulfillment of the first goat. His voluntary, substitutionary death poured out immaculate blood that satisfies the broken law, legally purchasing the redemption of every single believer who calls upon His name. As Hebrews declares, His sacrifice was offered once for all time, completely purging our consciences and granting us bold, unhindered access into the heavenly Holy of Holies. Our sins are fully paid for, entirely forgiven, and completely detached from our legal standing before God if we repent, are baptized into the Lord's body and keep His word. Yet, the cosmic record must still be cleared, and true justice demands that the primary instigator of rebellion cannot escape his own trial.

Therefore, the scapegoat finds its ultimate fulfillment in the final binding and banishment of Satan at the end of the millennium. Led away by the hand of a fit angelic messenger into the deep abyss of the bottomless pit, and eventually cast forever into the lake of fire, the ancient serpent is made to bear the ultimate accountability for the sin he introduced into God's beautiful

creation. This realization protects the integrity of the gospel: Christ alone is our Savior, while Satan is our defeated accuser, forced to carry his own guilt into absolute oblivion. Through this grand prophetic design, the promise of Scripture is fully realized, removing our transgressions as far as the east is from the west, and establishing a clean, holy, and eternal kingdom where God will dwell with His people forever.