

The Day of Atonement

Commentary on Leviticus 16, from *Commentary on the Old Testament*, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch

Leviticus 16

Leviticus 16. The sacrifices and purifications enjoined thus far did not suffice to complete the reconciliation between the congregation of Israel, which was called to be a holy nation, but in its very nature was still altogether involved in sin and uncleanness, and Jehovah the Holy One,—that is to say, to restore the perfect reconciliation and true vital fellowship of the nation with its God, in accordance with the idea and object of the old covenant,—because, even with the most scrupulous observance of these directions, many sins and defilements would still remain unacknowledged, and therefore without expiation, and would necessarily produce in the congregation a feeling of separation from its God, so that it would be unable to attain to the true joyousness of access to the throne of grace, and to the place of reconciliation with God. This want was met by the appointment of a yearly general and perfect expiation of all the sins and uncleanness which had remained unatoned for and uncleansed in the course of the year. In this respect the laws of sacrifice and purification received their completion and finish in the institution of the festival of atonement, which provided for the congregation of Israel the highest and most comprehensive expiation that was possible under the Old Testament. Hence the law concerning the day of atonement formed a fitting close to the ordinances designed to place the Israelites in fellowship with their God, and raise the promise of Jehovah, “I will be your God,” into a living truth. This law is described in the present chapter, and contains (1) the instructions as to the performance of the general expiation for the year (vv. 2–28), and (2) directions for the celebration of this festival every year (vv. 29–34). From the expiation effected upon this day it received the name of “*day of expiations*,” i.e., of the highest expiation

(Leviticus 23:27). The Rabbins call it briefly

כִּיּוֹם, the day κατ’ ἑξοχήν.

Leviticus 16:1, 2. The chronological link connecting the following law with the death of the sons of Aaron (Leviticus 10:1–5) was intended, not only to point out the historical event which led to the appointment of the day of atonement, but also to show the importance and holiness attached to an entrance into the inmost sanctuary of God. The death of Aaron’s sons, as a punishment for wilfully “drawing near before Jehovah,” was to be a solemn warning to Aaron himself, “not to come at all times into the holy place within the veil, before the mercy-seat upon the ark,” i.e., into the most holy place (see Ex. 25:10ff.), but only at the time to be appointed by Jehovah, and for the purposes instituted by Him, i.e., according to vv. 29ff., only once a year, on the day of atonement, and only in the manner prescribed in vv. 3ff., that he might not die.—“For I will appear in the cloud above the capporeth.” The cloud in which Jehovah appeared above the capporeth, between the cherubim (Ex. 25:22), was not the cloud of the incense, with which Aaron was to cover the capporeth on entering (v. 13), as *Vitringa, Bähr*, and others follow the Sadducees in supposing, but the cloud of the divine glory, in which Jehovah manifested His essential presence in the most holy place above the ark of the covenant. Because Jehovah appeared in this cloud, not only could no unclean and sinful man go before the capporeth, i.e., approach the holiness of the all-holy God; but even the anointed and sanctified high priest, if he went before it at his own pleasure, or without the expiatory blood of sacrifice, would expose himself to certain death. The reason for this prohibition is to be found in the fact, that the holiness communicated to the priest did not cancel the sin of his nature, but only covered it over for the performance of his official duties, and so long as the law, which produced only the knowledge of sin and not its forgiveness and removal, was not abolished by the complete atonement, the holy God was and remained to

mortal and sinful man a consuming fire, before which no one could stand.

Leviticus 16:3–5. Only **בְּזָאתָ**, “with this,” i.e., with the sacrifices, dress, purifications, and means of expiation mentioned afterwards, could he go into “the holy place,” i.e., according to the more precise description in v. 2, into the inmost division of the tabernacle, which is called *Kodesh hakkadashim*, “the holy of holies,” in Ex. 26:33. He was to bring an ox (bullock) for a sin-offering and a ram for a burnt-offering, as a sacrifice for himself and his house (i.e., the priesthood, v. 6), and two he-goats for a sin-offering and a ram for a burnt-offering, as a sacrifice for the congregation. For this purpose he was to put on, not the state-costume of the high priest, but a body-coat, drawers, girdle, and head-dress of white cloth (*bad*: see Ex. 28:42), having first bathed his body, and not merely his hands and feet, as he did for the ordinary service, to appear before Jehovah as entirely cleansed from the defilement of sin (see at Leviticus 8:6) and arrayed in clothes of holiness. The dress of white cloth was not the plain official dress of the ordinary priests, for the girdle of that dress was coloured (see at Ex. 28:39, 40); and in that case the high priest would not have appeared in the perfect purity of his divinely appointed office as chief of the priesthood, but simply as the priest appointed for this day (*v. Hofmann*). Nor did he officiate (as many of the Rabbins, and also *C. a Lapide, Grotius, Rosenmüller, and Knobel* suppose) as a penitent praying humbly for the forgiveness of sin. For where in all the world have clear white clothes been worn either in mourning or as a penitential garment? The emphatic expression, “*these are holy garments*,” is a sufficient proof that the pure white colour of all the clothes, even of the girdle, was intended as a representation of holiness. Although in Ex. 28:2, 4, etc., the official dress not only of Aaron, but of his sons also, that is to say, the priestly costume generally, is described as “holy garments,” yet in the present chapter the word *kodesh*, “holy,” is frequently used in an emphatic sense (for example, in vv.

2, 3, 16, of the most holy place of the dwelling), and by this predicate the dress is characterized as most holy. Moreover, it was in *baddim* (“linen”) that the angel of Jehovah was clothed (Ezek. 9:2, 3, 11; 10:2, 6, 7, and Dan. 10:5; 12:6, 7), whose whole appearance, as described in Dan. 10:6, resembled the appearance of the glory of Jehovah, which Ezekiel saw in the vision of the four cherubim (Ezek. 1), and was almost exactly like the glory of Jesus Christ, which John saw in the Revelation (Rev. 1:13–15). The white material, therefore, of the dress which Aaron wore, when performing the highest act of expiation under the Old Testament, was a symbolical shadowing forth of the holiness and glory of the one perfect Mediator between God and man, who, being the radiation of the glory of God and the image of His nature, effected by Himself the perfect cleansing away of our sin, and who, as the true High Priest, being holy, innocent, unspotted, and separate from sinners, entered once by His own blood into the holy place not made with hands, namely, into heaven itself, to appear before the face of God for us, and obtain everlasting redemption (Heb. 1:3; 7:26; 9:12, 24).

Leviticus 16:6–10. With the bullock Aaron was to make atonement for himself and his house. The two he-goats he was to place before Jehovah (see Leviticus 1:5), and “*give lots over them*,” i.e., have lots cast upon them, one lot for Jehovah, the other for Azazel. The one upon

which the lot for Jehovah fell (**עֲלָה**, from the coming up of the lot out of the urn, Josh. 18:11; 19:10), he was to prepare as a sin-offering for Jehovah, and to present the one upon which the lot for Azazel fell alive before Jehovah, **לְכַפֵּר**

עָלָיו, “to expiate it,” i.e., to make it the object of expiation (see at v. 21), to send it (them) into the desert to Azazel. **עֲזָאזֵל**, which only occurs in this chapter, signifies neither “a remote solitude,” nor any locality in the desert whatever (as *Jonathan, Rashi*, etc., suppose);

nor the “he-goat” (from עֵז goat, and עָזַר to turn off, “the goat departing or sent away,” as *Symm., Theodot., the Vulgate, Luther,* and others render it); nor “complete removal” (*Bähr, Winer, Tholuck,* etc.). The words, one lot for Jehovah and one for Azazel, require unconditionally that *Azazel* should be regarded as a personal being, in opposition to Jehovah.

The word is a more intense form of עָזַר

removit, dimovit, and comes from עֲזָזָה by absorbing the liquid, like *Babel* from *balbel* (Gen. 11:9), and *Golgotha* from *gulgalta* (*Ewald, § 158c*). The Septuagint rendering is correct, ὁ ἀποπομπᾶιος; although in v. 10 the rendering ἀποπομπή is also adopted, i.e., “*averruncus, a fiend, or demon whom one drives away*” (*Ewald*). We have not to think, however, of any demon whatever, who seduces men to wickedness in the form of an evil spirit, as the fallen angel *Azazel* is represented as doing in the Jewish writings (Book of Enoch 8:1; 10:10; 13:1ff.), like the terrible field *Shibe*, whom the Arabs of the peninsula of Sinai so much dread (*Seetzen, i. pp. 273–4*), but of the devil himself, the head of the fallen angels, who was afterwards called Satan; for no subordinate evil spirit could have been placed in antithesis to Jehovah as *Azazel* is here, but only the ruler or head of the kingdom of demons. The desert and desolate places are mentioned elsewhere as the abode of evil spirits (Isa. 13:21; 34:14; Matt. 12:43; Luke 11:24; Rev. 18:2). The desert, regarded as an image of death and desolation, corresponds to the nature of evil spirits, who fell away from the primary source of life, and in their hostility to God devastated the world, which was created good, and brought death and destruction in their train.

Leviticus 16:11–20. He was then to slay the bullock of the sin-offering, and make atonement for himself and his house (or family, i.e., for the priests, v. 33). But before bringing the blood of the sin-offering into the most holy place, he was to take “*the filling of the censer (machtah, a coal-pan, Ex. 25:38) with fire-coals,*” i.e., as

many burning coals as the censer would hold, from the altar of burnt-offering, and “*the filling of his hands,*” i.e., two hands full of “*fragrant incense*” (Ex. 30:34), and go with this within the veil, i.e., into the most holy place, and there place the incense upon the fire before Jehovah, “*that the cloud of (burning) incense might cover the capporeth above the testimony, and he might not die.*” The design of these instructions was not that the holiest place, the place of Jehovah’s presence, might be hidden by the cloud of incense from the gaze of the unholy eye of man, and so he might separate himself reverentially from it, that the person approaching might not be seized with destruction. But as burning incense was a symbol of *prayer*, this covering of the capporeth with the cloud of incense was a symbolical covering of the glory of the Most Holy One with prayer to God, in order that He might not see the sin, nor suffer His holy wrath to break forth upon the sinner, but might graciously accept, in the blood of the sin-offering, the souls for which it was presented. Being thus protected by the incense from the wrath of the holy God, he was to sprinkle (once) some of the blood of the ox with his finger, first upon the capporeth *in front*, i.e., not upon the top of the capporeth, but merely upon or against the front of it, and then seven times *before* the capporeth, i.e., upon the ground in front of it. It is here assumed as a matter of course, that when the offering of incense was finished, he would necessarily come out of the most holy place again, and go to the altar of burnt-offering to fetch some of the blood of the ox which had been slaughtered there.

Leviticus 16:15. After this he was to slay the he-goat as a sin-offering for the nation, for which purpose, of course, he must necessarily come back to the court again, and then take the blood of the goat into the most holy place, and do just the same with it as he had already done with that of the ox. A double sprinkling took place in both cases, first upon or against the capporeth, and then seven times in front of the capporeth. The first sprinkling, which was performed once only, was for the expiation of the sins, first of

the high priest and his house, and then of the congregation of Israel (Leviticus 4:7, and 18); the second, which was repeated seven times, was for the expiation of the sanctuary from the sins of the people. This is implied in the words of v. 16a, "and so shall he make expiation for the most holy place, on account of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and on account of their transgressions with regard to all their sins," which refer to both the sacrifices; since Aaron first of all expiated the sins of the priesthood, and the uncleanness with which the priesthood had stained the sanctuary through their sin, by the blood of the bullock of the sin-offering; and then the sins of the nation, and the uncleannesses with which it had defiled the sanctuary, by the he-goat, which was also slain as a sin-offering.³⁶

Leviticus 16:16b, 17. "And so shall he do to the tabernacle of the congregation that dwelleth among them." (i.e., has its place among them, Josh. 22:19) "in the midst of their uncleanness." The holy things were rendered unclean, not only by the sins of those who touched them, but by the uncleanness, i.e., the bodily manifestations of the sin of the nation; so that they also required a yearly expiation and cleansing through the expiatory blood of sacrifice. By *ohel moed*, "the tabernacle of the congregation," in vv. 16 and 17, as well as vv. 20 and 33, we are to understand the holy place of the tabernacle, to which the name of the whole is applied on account of its occupying the principal space in the dwelling, and in distinction from *kodesh* (the holy), which is used in this chapter to designate the most holy place, or the space at the back of the dwelling. It follows still further from this, that by the altar in v. 18, and also in v. 20 and 33, which is mentioned here as the third portion of the entire sanctuary, we are to understand the altar of burnt-offering in the court, and not the altar of incense, as the Rabbins and most of the commentators assume. This rabbinical view cannot be sustained, either from Ex. 30:10 or from the context. Ex. 30:10 simply prescribes a yearly expiation of the altar of incense on the day of atonement; and this is implied in the

words "so shall he do," in v. 16b. For these words can only mean, that in the same way in which he had expiated the most holy place he was also to expiate the holy place of the tabernacle, in which the altar of incense took the place of the ark of the covenant of the most holy place; so that the expiation was performed by his putting blood, in the first place, upon the horns of the altar, and then sprinkling it seven times upon the ground in front of it. The expression "go out" in v. 18 refers, not to his going out of the most holy into the holy place, but to his going out of the *ohel moed* (or holy place) into the court.

Leviticus 16:17. There was to be no one in the *ohel moed* when Aaron went into it to make expiation in the most holy place, until he came out (of the tabernacle) again; not because no one but the chief servant of Jehovah was worthy to be near or present either as spectator or assistant at this sacred act before Jehovah (*Knobel*), but because no unholy person was to defile by his presence the sanctuary, which had just been cleansed; just as no layman at all was allowed to enter the holy place, or could go with impunity into the presence of the holy God.

Leviticus 16:18, 19. After he had made atonement for the dwelling, Aaron was to expiate the altar in the court, by first of all putting some of the blood of the bullock and he-goat upon the horns of the altar, and then sprinkling it seven times with his finger, and thus cleansing and sanctifying it from the uncleannesses of the children of Israel. The application of blood to the horns of the altar was intended to expiate the sins of the priests as well as those of the nation; just as in the case of ordinary sin-offerings it expiated the sins of individual members of the nation (Leviticus 4:25, 30, 34), to which the priests also belonged; and the sevenfold sprinkling effected the purification of the place of sacrifice from the uncleannesses of the congregation.

The meaning of the sprinkling of blood upon the caphoreth and the horns of the two altars was the same as in the case of every sin-offering (see pp. 509 and 523). The peculiar

features in the expiatory ritual of the day of atonement were the following. In the first place, the blood of both sacrifices was taken not merely into the holy place, but into the most holy, and sprinkled directly upon the throne of God. This was done to show that the true atonement could only take place before the throne of God Himself, and that the sinner was only then truly reconciled to God, and placed in the full and living fellowship of peace with God, when he could come directly to the throne of God, and not merely to the place where, although the Lord indeed manifested His grace to him, He was still separated from him by a curtain. In this respect, therefore, the bringing of the blood of atonement into the most holy place had a prophetic signification, and was a predictive sign that the curtain, which then separated Israel from its God, would one day be removed, and that with the entrance of the full and eternal atonement free access would be opened to the throne of the Lord. The *second* peculiarity in this act of atonement was the sprinkling of the blood seven times upon the holy places, the floor of the holy of holies and holy place, and the altar of the court; also the application of blood to the media of atonement in the three divisions of the tabernacle, for the cleansing of the holy places from the uncleanness of the children of Israel. As this uncleanness cannot be regarded as consisting of physical defilement, but simply as the ideal effluence of their sins, which had been transferred to the objects in question; so, on the other hand, the cleansing of the holy places can only be understood as consisting in an ideal transference of the influence of the atoning blood to the inanimate objects which had been defiled by sin. If the way in which the sacrificial blood, regarded as the expiation of souls, produced its cleansing effects was, that by virtue thereof the sin was covered over, whilst the sinner was reconciled to God and received forgiveness of sin and the means of sanctification, we must regard the sin-destroying virtue of the blood as working in the same way also upon the objects defiled by sin, namely, that powers were transferred to them which removed the effects proceeding from sin,

and in this way wiped out the uncleanness of the children of Israel that was in them. This communication of purifying powers to the holy things was represented by the sprinkling of the atoning blood upon and against them, and indeed by their being sprinkled seven times, to set forth the communication as raised to an efficiency corresponding to its purpose, and to impress upon it the stamp of a divine act through the number seven, which was sanctified by the work of God in creation.

Leviticus 16:20–22. After the completion of the expiation and cleansing of the holy things, Aaron was to bring up the live goat, i.e., to have it brought before the altar of burnt-offering, and placing both his hands upon its head, to confess all the sins and transgressions of the children of Israel upon it, and so put them upon its head. He was then to send the goat away into the desert by a man who was standing ready, that it might carry all its sins upon it into a land cut off; and there the man was to set the goat at

liberty. עֵתִי, ἀπάξ λεγ. from עֵת an appointed time, signifies opportune, present at the right time, or ready. גְּזֹרָה, which is also met with in

this passage alone, from גָּזַר to cut, or cut off, that which is severed, a country cut off from others, not connected by roads with any inhabited land. "The goat was not to find its way back" (*Knobel*). To understand clearly the meaning of this symbolical rite, we must start from the fact, that according to the distinct words of v. 5, the two goats were to serve as a sin-offering (לְחַטָּאת). They were both of them devoted, therefore, to one and the same purpose, as was pointed out by the Talmudists, who laid down the law on that very account, that they were to be exactly alike, *colore, statura, et valore*. The living goat, therefore, is not to be regarded merely as the bearer of the sin to be taken away, but as quite as truly a sin-offering as the one that was slaughtered. It was appointed לְכַפֵּר עָלָיו (v. 10), i.e., not that an expiatory rite might be performed over it, for

עַל with כִּפֵּר always applies to the object of the expiation, but properly to expiate it, i.e., to make it the object of the expiation, or make expiation with it. To this end the sins of the nation were confessed upon it with the laying on of hands, and thus symbolically laid upon its head, that it might bear them, and when sent into the desert carry them away thither. The sins, which were thus laid upon its head by confession, were the sins of Israel, which had already been expiated by the sacrifice of the other goat. To understand, however, how the sins already expiated could still be confessed and laid upon the living goat, it is not sufficient to say, with *Bähr*, that the expiation with blood represented merely a covering or covering up of the sin, and that in order to impress upon the expiation the stamp of the greatest possible completeness and perfection, a supplement was appended, which represented the carrying away and removal of the sin. For in the case of every sin-offering for the congregation, in addition to the covering or forgiveness of sin represented by the sprinkling of blood, the removal or abolition of it was also represented by the burning of the flesh of the sacrifice; and this took place in the present instance also. As both goats were intended for a sin-offering, the sins of the nation were confessed upon both, and placed upon the heads of both by the laying on of hands; though it is of the living goat only that this is expressly recorded, being omitted in the case of the other, because the rule laid down in Leviticus 4:4ff. was followed.³⁷ By both Israel was delivered from all sins and transgressions; but by the one, upon which the lot "for Jehovah" fell, it was so with regard to Jehovah; by the other, upon which the lot "for Azazel" fell, with regard to Azazel. With regard to Jehovah, or in relation to Jehovah, the sins were wiped away by the sacrifice of the goat; the sprinkling of the blood setting forth their forgiveness, and the burning of the animal the blotting of them out; and with this the separation of the congregation from Jehovah because of its sin was removed, and living fellowship with God restored. But Israel had also been brought by its sin into a distinct

relation to Azazel, the head of the evil spirits; and it was necessary that this should be brought to an end, if reconciliation with God was to be perfectly secured. This complete deliverance from sin and its author was symbolized in the leading away of the goat, which had been laden with the sins, into the desert. This goat was to take back the sins, which God had forgiven to His congregation, into the desert to Azazel, the father of all sin, in the one hand as a proof that his evil influences upon men would be of no avail in the case of those who had received expiation from God, and on the other hand as a proof to the congregation also that those who were laden with sin could not remain in the kingdom of God, but would be banished to the abode of evil spirits, unless they were redeemed therefrom. This last point, it is true, is not expressly mentioned in the text; but it is evident from the fate which necessarily awaited the goat, when driven into the wilderness in the "land cut off." It would be sure to perish out there in the desert, that is to say, to suffer just what a winner would have to endure if his sins remained upon him; though probably it is only a later addition, not founded in the law, which we find in the *Mishnah, Joma* vi. 6, viz., that the goat was driven headlong from a rock in the desert, and dashed to pieces at the foot. There is not the slightest idea of presenting a sacrifice to Azazel. This goat was a sin-offering, only so far as it was laden with the sins of the people to carry them away into the desert; and in this respect alone is there a resemblance between the two goats and the two birds used in the purification of the leper (Leviticus 14:4ff.), of which the one to be set free was bathed in the blood of the one that was killed. In both cases the reason for making use of two animals is to be found purely in the physical impossibility of combining all the features, that had to be set forth in the sin-offering, in one single animal.

Leviticus 16:23–28. After the living goat had been sent away, Aaron was to go into the tabernacle, i.e., the holy place of the dwelling, and there take off his white clothes and lay them down, i.e., put them away, because they

were only to be worn in the performance of the expiatory ritual of this day, and then bathe his body in the holy place, i.e., in the court, in the laver between the altar and the door of the dwelling, probably because the act of laying the sins upon the goat rendered him unclean. He was then to put on his clothes, i.e., the coloured state-dress of the high priest, and to offer in this the burnt-offerings, for an atonement for himself and the nation (see Leviticus 1:4), and to burn the fat portions of the sin-offerings upon the altar.

Leviticus 16:26 ff. The man who took the goat into the desert, and those who burned the two sin-offerings outside the camp (see at Leviticus 4:11, 21), had also to wash their clothes and bathe their bodies before they returned to the camp, because they had been defiled by the animals laden with sin.

Leviticus 16:29–34. *“General directions for the yearly celebration of the day of atonement.—It was to be kept on the tenth day of the seventh month, as an “everlasting statute” (see at Ex. 12:14). On that day the Israelites were to “afflict their souls,” i.e., to fast, according to Leviticus 23:32, from the evening of the 9th till the evening of the 10th day. Every kind of work was to be suspended as on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10), by both natives and foreigners (see Ex. 12:49), because this day was a high Sabbath (Ex. 31:15). Both fasting and sabbatical rest are enjoined again in Leviticus 23:27ff. and Num. 29:7, on pain of death. The fasting commanded for this day, the only fasting prescribed in the law, is most intimately connected with the signification of the feast of atonement. If the general atonement made on this day was not to pass into a dead formal service, the people must necessarily enter in spirit into the signification of the act of expiation, prepare their souls for it with penitential feelings, and manifest this penitential state by abstinence from the ordinary enjoyments of life. To “afflict (bow, humble) the soul,” by restraining the earthly appetites, which have their seat in the soul, is the early Mosaic expression for *fasting* (צום). The latter word came first of all into use in the*

time of the Judges (Judg. 20:26; 1 Sam. 7:6; cf. Ps. 35:13: “I afflicted my soul with fasting”). “By bowing his soul the Israelite was to place himself in an inward relation to the sacrifice, whose soul was given for his soul; and by this state of mind, answering to the outward proceedings of the day, he was to appropriate the fruit of it to himself, namely, the reconciliation of his soul, which passed through the animal’s death” (*Baumgarten*).

Leviticus 16:32 ff. In the future, the priest who was anointed and set apart for the duty of the priesthood in his father’s stead, i.e., the existing high priest, was to perform the act of expiation in the manner prescribed, and that “once a year.” The yearly repetition of the general atonement showed that the sacrifices of the law were not sufficient to make the servant of God perfect according to this own conscience. And this imperfection of the expiation, made with the blood of bullocks and goats, could not fail to awaken a longing for the perfect sacrifice of the eternal High Priest, who has obtained eternal redemption by entering once, through His own blood, into the holiest of all (Heb. 9:7–12). And just as this was effected negatively, so by the fact that the high priest entered on this day into the holiest of all, as the representative of the whole congregation, and there, before the throne of God, completed its reconciliation with Him, was the necessity exhibited in a positive manner for the true reconciliation of man, and his introduction into a perfect and abiding fellowship with Him, and the eventual realization of this by the blood of the Son of God, our eternal High Priest and Mediator, prophetically foreshadowed. The closing words in v. 34, “and he (i.e., Aaron, to whom Moses was to communicate the instructions of God concerning the feast of atonement, v. 2) did as the Lord commanded Moses,” are anticipatory in their character, like Ex. 12:50. For the law in question could not be carried out till the seventh month of the current year, that is to say, as we find from a comparison of Num. 10:11 with Ex. 40:17, not till after the departure of Israel from Sinai.