

# Returning to the Most Holy Place

## *A Biblical Theology of The Day of Atonement*

**Leviticus 16:1** The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died,  
<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> "Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house.

<sup>7</sup> Then he shall take the two goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

<sup>8</sup> And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel.

<sup>9</sup> And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD and use it as a sin offering,

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> "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.

<sup>12</sup> 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

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> "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.

<sup>16</sup> Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses 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 uncleannesses.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> And he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel.

<sup>20</sup> "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.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.

<sup>23</sup> "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.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> And the fat of the sin offering he shall burn on the altar.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> And he who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp.

<sup>29</sup> "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.

<sup>30</sup> For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins.

<sup>31</sup> It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever.

<sup>32</sup> And the priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the holy linen garments.

<sup>33</sup> 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.

<sup>34</sup> 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.

(Lev 16:1-34)

---

---

## A Sacred Journey to Yahweh's Abode

We have arrived at what is probably [the best known](#) and perhaps the most important chapter in Leviticus. As such, it deserves our time and attention. I've decided to spend several weeks looking at it from three different angles.

Today, I want to look at [the big picture of Leviticus 16](#) by asking a question: What is Leviticus?

Is Leviticus merely a law-code, a set of rules God gave to Israel to set them apart from other nations? It is, of course, at least that. But it is more than that. It is, in fact, [a book](#). As a book, it is supposed to be read as an internally coherent piece of literature. But at the same time, it is a book in a series we call the [Pentateuch](#), which the Jews call “[Torah](#).” Pentateuch is a compound word consisting of *pente* (“five”) and *teukhos* (“tool, scroll, book”). The Pentateuch refers to the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

While each of these five books have their own name, they are also often considered [one unit of thought](#): “[the law of Moses](#)” ([Luke 2:22; 24:44; Acts 28:23](#)) or “[the book of Moses](#)” ([Mark 12:26](#)) or simply “[Moses](#)” ([Luke 24:27; Acts 15:21](#)). The Pentateuch, like the individual books, also has its own internal coherence and can be read as a single unit. Scholars have noticed that there are [chiasms](#) at various levels [that connect all five books](#):

A Exod. 15:22–25 transformation of water from bitter to sweet  
 B 17:1–7 water from the rock  
 C 17:8–16 Amalekite—Israelite war  
 D 18 leadership relief for Moses  
 E 18:27 the Midianite Hobab, Moses' father-in-law  
 F 19:1–2 arrival at Sinai

### SINAI

F' Num. 10:11–23 departure from Sinai  
 E' 10:29–32 the Midianite Hobab, Moses' father-in-law  
 D' 11 leadership relief for Moses  
 C' 14:39–45 Amalekite—Israelite war  
 B' 20:1–13 water from the rock  
 A' 21:16–18 the spring<sup>1</sup>

Or,

<b>Genesis</b>	Prologue
<b>Exodus</b>	Leaving Egypt Building the tabernacle
<b>Leviticus</b>	The tabernacle service
<b>Numbers</b>	Dedicating the tabernacle Preparing to enter Canaan
<b>Deuteronomy</b>	Epilogue <sup>2</sup>

Or,

**A. Genesis.** Separation from the nations/Blessing/Seeing the land/Descendants and the land  
**B. Exodus.** Israel's desert journeys/Apostasy and plagues/Pharaoh and magicians/First-born/Levites  
**C. Leviticus.** Sacrifices/Cleanliness/Holiness  
**B<sup>1</sup>. Numbers.** Israel's desert journeys/Apostasy and plagues/Balak and Balaam/First-born/Levites  
**A<sup>1</sup>. Deuteronomy.** Separation from the nations/Blessing/Seeing the land/Descendants and the land<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?: A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 37, New Studies in Biblical Theology (England; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 2015), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Moshe Kline, "The Literary Structure of Leviticus," *The Biblical Historian* 2/3 (2006): 1-28. Cited without page number in Morales, 25. (I cannot find this chiasm in Kline's article).

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Leder, *Waiting for the Land: The Story Line of the Pentateuch* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 34-35.

The reason this matters here is that when you break the structure down to its most **central point**, you end up in **Leviticus 16 and the Day of Atonement**.<sup>4</sup> In fact, you end up with the actual atonement ceremony being the center of the center of the entire Pentateuch.

FRAME: ‘And YHWH said to Moses ...’ (16:1)

- A. Aaron should not go into holy of holies any time he wishes (16:2)
- B. Aaron’s sacrificial victims, special vestment (16:3–4)
- C. Sacrificial victims provided by people (16:5)
  - D. Aaron’s bull, goat for sin-offering, goat for Azazel (16:6–10)
  - E. Aaron sacrifices bull (16:11–14)
  - F. Goat sacrificed as sin-offering (16:15)
- A. Genesis
- B. Exodus
  - X. Leviticus—ch.16 →**
  - B.’ Numbers
- A.’ Deuteronomy
- F.’ Goat sent to wilderness (16:20b–22)
- E.’ Aaron’s closing activities (16:23–25)
- D.’ Goat for Azazel, Aaron’s bull, goat for sin-offering (16:26–28)
- C.’ People rest and humble themselves (16:29–31)
- B.’ Anointed priest officiates wearing special garments (16:32–33)
- A.’ Anointed priest makes atonement once a year (16:34)

FRAME: ‘As YHWH commanded Moses ...’ (16:34)<sup>5</sup>

Now, we’ve talked quite a bit about how Leviticus is itself **structured around the geography of the tabernacle**, such that it presents us with a movement in the presentation of its laws from the courtyard with a warning not to enter the Holy Place in any way other than what is prescribed, to the Holy Place (with another warning), and finally to the Most Holy

<sup>4</sup> **Morales** (27-28) cites a host of scholars who all arrive at Lev 16 as the center of the book, each through different approaches.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Place. But this is in keeping with the fact that Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers actually take us through a larger geographical progression.

Exodus	A. In Egypt (1:1-15:21)
	B. In the Wilderness (15:22-18:26)
	C. At Mount Sinai (19-40)
Leviticus	D. Leviticus as Covenant <sup>6</sup> → <b>Day of Atonement (Lev 16)</b>
Numbers	C <sup>1</sup> . At Mount Sinai (1:1-10:10)
	B <sup>1</sup> . In the Wilderness (10:11-21:35)
	A <sup>1</sup> . in Transjordan (22-36)

Michael Morales calls this movement, “**A Sacred Journey to YHWH’s Abode,**”<sup>7</sup> and he depicts it like climbing a mountain. That is, when you begin in Genesis, you begin this slow, uphill ascent (with many ups and downs) through Exodus and on into Leviticus when you reach the summit in Leviticus 16, after which you begin the descent, because you have met with God, he is satisfied and appeased in the relationship, and you are prepared now for life in the land.

This is significant for several reasons. **First**, the entire book of Leviticus literally takes place at Mt. Sinai, the place that God desired for his abode (**Ps 68:16**), so reading the book as an ascent to the top of the mountain makes sense of

---

<sup>6</sup> Modified from Morales, 35. “Leviticus as Covenant” is language I take from **Scott W. Hahn**, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 155.

<sup>7</sup> Morales, 35. Pictures are p. 28 and 37.

the geography. **Second**, both Sinai and the tabernacle (which the book is literally patterned upon) are sanctuaries of God, which both have the same basic geographical features that are patterned after the heavenly temple reality. Therefore, they are copies of one another and having the book's structure emulate the tabernacle and Sinai is complementary.

**Third**, this follows a universal biblical theme of God's people and a special representative meeting with him on a mountain (of his choosing). The thing about this theme is that it is not just about meeting with God in his abode. In the Bible, the sad history of our race is that just when the best of our race are about to get a glimpse of God in his habitat, they do something terrible. **All sin against God**, thereby bringing about expulsion from God's presence, cast off the mountain, away from the Holy of Holies, and the covenant grace of God. I want to tell you about this story now, because it is central to your coming to understand what Leviticus is about, and why Ch. 16 is the center of the entire Pentateuch.

## **Expulsion from the Sanctuary**



At the Beginning, God decided to create for himself a **sanctuary**, the earth sanctuary, which he created so that man might enjoy a seat with him in his divine council. This is what Genesis 1 is all about. God is making his earth-temple. “**Heaven is my throne, earth is my footstool,**” Isaiah tells us (**Isa 66:1a**). At the end of that creation, God **rested**. The purpose of that rest was to enthrone him as King over his creation. Hence, Isaiah continues, “**What is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest**” (**Isa 66:1b**).

God’s very special presence in this sanctuary was the garden of Eden situated on “**the mountain of God**” (**Ezek 28:16**), his “**sanctuary**” (**18**). God brought this land out of the midst of the primordial **waters** of Genesis 1:2, representative of **Sheol**, the watery realm of death and chaos, sanctifying it in a kind of primeval baptism, as Tertullian called it, a separation, a *mikveh* as **Genesis 1:10** says. To this place, God **brought the man** which he had created somewhere outside in the wilderness called the *tohu* and *bohu* (waste and void; **Gen 1:2**). God “put” him in the Garden (**2:8**) to “**work and keep**” it (**2:15**). These words (*abad* and *shamar*) are found elsewhere together throughout the Pentateuch where, “**Without exception they ... refer**

either to Israelites ‘serving and guarding/obeying’ God’s word (about 10 times) or, more often to **priests** who ‘serve’ God in the temple and ‘guard’ the temple from **unclean things entering it.**”<sup>8</sup> So Adam was God’s high priest (he was also prophet and king, but we are not concerned with that here).

Adam was given a holy, covenantal, priestly task. He was to **serve and guard the temple-sanctuary of Eden.** If he obeyed, he would live. Like the Levities helping Aaron, the LORD gave Adam a partner to help him carry out his high priestly role. But what was there to serve and guard? The **law of God** which he had commanded to them not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This represented God’s own holiness and if anything tried to tempt them to sin, they were to cast out the **unclean** thing from their midst. This they did not do when Satan, the shining one, came to them. And for it, though God would cover their sins in the **sacrifice** of an animal offered in the sanctuary, they would be **cast out of the sanctuary**, for in their treason, as they had themselves become unclean and thus unfit to inhabit holy space.

---

<sup>8</sup> G. K. Beale, “Eden, The Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” *JETS* 48:1 (2005): 8 [5-32].

After their expulsion, they walked through the **east** gate, now guarded by two **cherubim**, and were consigned to live outside the holy place for the rest of their lives. In time, one of their **descendants** from the line of Cain built himself a **city** far away to the east of God's dwelling (**Gen 4:16-17**). This city turned into a cultural center that ended upon becoming a den of iniquity, a hole in the ground far, far away from the presence of God in the mountain-garden.

This story is **repeated again and again in the Pentateuch**. **Noah**, he whose name means "**rest**," became God's specially chosen vehicle through which to save humanity. God covenanted with Noah who was commanded to build an ark, effectively a three-story **sanctuary** that would protect him from the wrath of God in the Flood. Noah enjoyed sweet fellowship with the LORD who spoke with him as God had spoken to Adam so long before. Then God sent the **flood** in a baptism of death to kill all but eight of Adam's remaining children for the wicked things they had been doing. All returned to that watery chaotic state of **Genesis 1:2**, before God had begun creating.

When the waters subsided, the high **mountains** were the first to see the light of day. The ark came to **rest** in the mountains of Ararat, and Noah offered to God a **sacrifice** on

one of them. This “new Adam” was filling in nicely for his grandfather who had been expunged from the Garden, until, that is, he came **down from the mountain**, planted a vineyard (many Rabbis connected this to the forbidden fruit of Eden, though without much justification), got drunk, and let his son sleep with his wife in an attempt to steal the birthright. Noah would not be the Second Adam, but like his father before him, he and his posterity would not be allowed back on the **mountain**, away from the presence of God.

To remedy this situation, his descendants decided to **build another city**, far away to the **east** of the ark where God had been with Noah (**Gen 11:2**), Babel, the anti-city, in an attempt to make a **name** for themselves. There they would erect a tower, a ziggurat, a man-made mountain meant to connect men to heaven, thereby **forcing entrance** into the divine sanctuary ... on their own terms. But God would have none of it. He was the one who was going to make a name for himself. He scattered those rebels over the face of the earth, away from their temple, away from God’s presence, confusing their languages so that they might never again attempt such a defiant act of hubris.

God chose another man—**Shem**. Shem's name means "Name," and God would make a name for himself through Shem and his descendant Abram. God called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans near Babylon, the land of the tower. "Chaldea," meaning **Astrologers, Wonderers, and as it were, demons** who "**lay waste**" and "**destroy**," is a place is likened to Sheol.<sup>9</sup> God brought Abram west, through the river, and took him into the Promised Land, which he had covenanted to give him. Here, he would meet with Abraham on a **mountain**, Moriah, where he would command the man to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice on what would later become Mt. Zion. In this story we find a direct relationship to Leviticus 16, for in it "**contains cultic terminology clustered together elsewhere only for the ordination of the Levitical priests (Lev 8–9) and for the Day of Atonement (Lev 16).**"<sup>10</sup> Would Adam reclaim permanent entrance to the Holy of Holies?

Abram enjoyed close fellowship with God, the Angel of the LORD, on his abode, but like his ancestors, would find

---

<sup>9</sup> Morales has this in a chart but does not give a discussion. It seems to me a couple of lines of evidence point to it. First, Babylon is likened to the waters (Ps 137:1; Jer 51:55). Second, the sea-creature who rules the waters of Sheol, Leviathan, is likened only directly in Scripture to Egypt and indirectly to Babylon (Isa 14:12 and 27:1). Third, Babylon's king (both earthly and heavenly ruler) are sent to Sheol as punishment for their sins (Isa 14:9-11).

<sup>10</sup> **Morales**, 73.

himself **struggling with sin**, first in Egypt, then with his handmaiden Hagar, and then with his nephew Lot. He would offer Lot whatever land he wanted, even if it turned out to be the land of promise, and Abram would go his own way. But Lot saw a valley in the **east**, away from the dwelling of God where he had been worshiped by Abram.<sup>11</sup> It was well-watered like the Garden of God (**Gen 13:10-11**). But this was not God's Eden. Lot's choice was, like the pattern, away from God's covenantal presence, indeed into the wicked **city** of Sodom.

The descendants of Abraham would eventually become many, and in the days of Jacob, because of a famine, they would have to travel to **down to Egypt**. It is always “down” to Egypt. Indeed, the last words of Genesis are that,

*Joseph died ...*

*And they embalmed him*

*And he was placed in a coffin*

*In Egypt.*

---

<sup>11</sup> The Moriah story is after this, so at this point, this would be at the altar Abram built at Ai (**Gen 12:8; 13:3**).

Down is the direction of the grave, Sheol, the watery abyss, which Egypt is itself likened directly to through the name Leviathan, the sea-creature who rules the waters of Sheol (Ps 74:13-14; cf. “Rahab” and Ps 89:9-10; Isa 30:7; 51:9-10). And so Egypt is the place of death and chaos from which God’s people must escape.

Escape they do, through the glorious might of the Right Arm of the LORD, Christ himself (Jude 5), delivering them from their slavery. One would think that they would have been brought straight back to the Promised Land where the Patriarchs had sojourned. But it was not to be. Not yet.

Instead, God wanted to meet with them at the place of his own choosing, still another mountain, Mt. Sinai. This would be to teach them all what it would mean if they were to truly begin to dwell in a place where God was in their midst. From the point of the Red Sea crossing, through all of Leviticus, and well on into the book of Numbers, everything in between takes place at Mt. Sinai. This includes Israel’s own fall off the mountain, at the golden calf incident where they barely escaped their total eradication. But it also includes the giving of instructions on how to approach him in the tabernacle, a sanctuary patterned after Eden. Morales discusses how this whole movement to Sinai is the

“antipode” (opposite) of the tower of Babel where, “Humanity’s rebellious ‘let us make for ourselves a name’ by ascending into God’s abode (Gen 11:4) will give way to God’s ‘let them make for me a sanctuary’ (Ex 25:8) as he descends to make his dwelling among Israel.”<sup>12</sup>

As the instructions go, to approach God, they make their way from the east to the west. They come into the courtyard where they are washed in the waters. They offer sacrifices to purify both man and object. Then they come to the holy place with its food and candlestick that looks like a tree of life, and finally into the most holy place where God sits enthroned between the cherubim over the ark of the law. The structure of the book has been to lead us to a question. What must be done to get a man back into that holiest of places where God resides?

So far, only two have penetrated to that place, and when they tried, they were incinerated. For even with all the sacrifices and cleanliness laws, people are forgetful and heedless of all they must do to approach the Holy God.

The Psalmist asks, “Who shall dwell on your holy hill?” (Ps 15:1). The answer, “He who walks blamelessly and does

---

<sup>12</sup> Morales, 68.



what is right and speaks truth in his heart” (2). Again, “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?” (Ps 24:3). “He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully” (4). The problem is, as we have seen, the entire narrative of human history has been **one gigantic failure of sin** and rebellion, even from those who have been so privileged by God. No one has been found worthy. Not even Moses. This is where Leviticus 16 finally comes into view.

## Reentry through Atonement

Leviticus 16 is, as I have said, **the literary summit of the entire Pentateuch**. It was also at the **heart of Israel’s calendar** and the **holiest day of the year**. In fact, it still is. Recall back in Leviticus 8 that God commanded the priests to be ordained in an eight-day ceremony beginning on the **first day of the new year**. This coincides with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year festival. It was on the eighth and last day of this ceremony that Nadab and Abihu went into the Holy of Holies and offered strange fire, dying a terrible death of being burned alive by the fire of God. Their deaths

signaled that even priests who had been cleansed and purified could not stand before a holy God in his Glory-Presence. That which began with the expulsion of Adam has continued all the way until this moment. Something more is still needed.

Enter the [Day \(yom\) of Atonement \(kippur\)](#). This is what Leviticus 16 now explains, and its function in the overall structure of the Pentateuch is to allow the Most Holy Place to be entered again by a man and not die, thereby reestablishing that original seat we had in Eden. It is [the legal reversal](#) of all those descents away from God's dwelling we have just discussed. And that makes this chapter very good news.

The Day of Atonement is about [two](#) things. The most obvious is [atonement](#). We've seen this word before in the sacrifices and offerings in the book. The second thing is that this is a day of [repentance](#), a turning away from your sins. It is written into the law that this must take place, but the law can't change a heart, only God's grace through Christ can do that. These two things working in conjunction make the Day effective. For the remainder of our time, we are going to walk through the chapter. Then, next time we will look

in much more detail at the idea of atonement, and after that we will look at the strange history of the scapegoat.

### *Framing the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:1, 34b)*

Rather than go verse by verse, I want to look at this chapter through the “pairings” of the chiasm (above). What do I mean? First, notice that the chapter is **framed by an introduction and a conclusion** (as many of these chapters have been). “**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...**” (**Lev 16:1-2a**). This important opening **puts us back into that dreadful story** and sets the stage for entering the Most Holy Place. We will see later that this special day takes place very close to the memorial day of that terrible event.

The last verse of the chapter is the other end of the frame. “**And Aaron did as the LORD commanded Moses**” (**34b**). Here we see **the outcome of the chapter**. Why Aaron (rather than Moses) and what did he do?

## *The High Priest in the Most Holy Place (A, A<sup>1</sup> – Lev 16:2, 34a)*

Aaron becomes the focus of the Day because he is the high priest of Israel. The “A” pair begins with Christ commanding 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” (2). The ceremony is going to deal with the high priest actually going into the Most Holy Place, in a reversal of the fortunes of Adam who failed his priestly duty and was cast out of it. No one else was permitted entrance; only the high priest.<sup>13</sup> The way it is worded very much makes it sound like this is what Nadab and Abihu did when they offered their fire “before the LORD” (Lev 10:1). They went where they were not supposed to go, offering fire they were not supposed to have. This must not be done.

Why? It is because this is the place where God is in his special presence as the Angel. This takes a little explaining,

---

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that there are stories that the ark of the covenant made its way down to Ethiopia and the Ethiopian church to this day claims they have it. One man, and only one man, is permitted to see it. He is never allowed to leave the confines from the day he is ordained until the day he stops. For the intriguing story see [Graham Hancock](#), *The sign and the Seal* (New York: Touchstone, 1992).

but the short of it is that Aaron is drawing near to the throne-room of Yahweh. This is understood when you learn what **the ark of the covenant** and this “**mercy seat**” actually are. The ark of the covenant was a golden box which was carried by hand with two wooden poles fixed through rings. On top of the ark was placed a “lid” with two golden cherubim facing one another.

It has a conceptual parallel in the thrones of ancient near eastern kings. For example, King Tut’s throne is made of gold, had two cherubim on the sides, and a box at the bottom as a footstool.

Furthermore, when the king needed to go somewhere, he was transported, by hand, on a portable throne that was carried by servants using poles attached to the throne. In this way, the ark of the covenant is the footstool and the “mercy seat” is the throne. Hence, king David said, “**Hear me, my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD and for the footstool of our God, and I made preparations for building**” (1Ch 28:2).

This, then, explains why the LORD will “appear” here in **Lev 16:2**. But you must appreciate the language. Appearance is the language of **sight**. It is the same verb used

of other visible appearances of the LORD in Genesis and Exodus. This includes the Word of the LORD appearing to Abraham's vision (**Gen 15:1; cf. 17:1; 18:1**), and the Angel of the LORD appearing at the Burning Bush and later to Gideon (**Jdg 6:12**) and Sampson's parents (**Jdg 13:3**).

In fact, it says he will appear “in the cloud” over the mercy seat, that is, **on his throne**. This appearing “in the cloud” is what it says the Angel of the LORD did at the Exodus (**Ex 14:19**), when “The LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud” (**Ex 13:21**) and “the Glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud” (**16:10**), the LORD “descended in a cloud” on Mt. Sinai (**19:9; 34:5**), and came “in the cloud” to the tabernacle at the end of the book (**40:38**). How many miss this incredible word?

Only the Son of God comes in an appearance of a man/angel, and indeed, this ark is *his* throne. He is the God of Israel, the Son they knew and worshiped. The cloud is a symbol of his being **enshrouded by the Glory-Spirit of God**, an OT parallel to the Spirit-dove hovering over Jesus as his baptism. It seems, then, as though what is being promised to Aaron (and his high priestly descendants) is that he will actually get to behold a **visible sight** of the preincarnate Christ himself on this one day of the year when he was

permitted into the throne-room of the LORD.<sup>14</sup> This is why he was **not to come “at any time”** into this place, for one does not just intrude upon the King’s chambers, but must be invited by the King himself, lest he die (the story of Esther having to approach the king tells this beautifully).

Why is he permitted to come on this day? This is where the other “A” (**vs. 34a**) is helpful. **“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.”** It is for the purpose of **atonement**. This word atonement is something we will look at in much more detail next time. This atonement is a **“purging”** or **“cleansing”** to make something fit for God’s presence. Here, it is a purging of all their sins. It makes the people fit. **“Sins”** calls to mind not only Nadab and Abihu again,<sup>15</sup> but also any other sins that have been neglected or **unintentionally** committed throughout the year. The point is, God is truly being gracious to his chosen people, so that he might not break out against them.

*A Humble Sacrifice of a Man Washed and Clothed (B, B<sup>1</sup>—16:3-4, 32-33)*

---

<sup>14</sup> See **Heiser**, *Notes on Leviticus 16*.

<sup>15</sup> This is necessitated in that it is a chiasmic pairing with vs. 2 which brings them up.

How does this get accomplished? “In this way Aaron shall come into the Holy Place...” (Lev 16:3). He must bring an offering: a bull from the heard for a purification/sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. Two big and expensive sacrifices. But first, he must also prepare his body. First, there is the clothing. “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” (4). This is not the regular ornate dress Moses commanded him to wear the rest of the year. Those,

... were made of gold and rare gems and woven of costly dyed fabrics. For the rites described here, the High Priest donned unadorned white linen vestments that were fashioned especially for the occasion and that, undoubtedly, were of particular significance. They symbolized the abject state of the High Priest, the representative of the Israelite people, in seeking expiation of sins and making confession.<sup>16</sup>

Second, “He shall bathe his body in water and then put them on” (4b). So we’ve got here a bathing and a clothing,

---

<sup>16</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 101.



just like we saw when he was ordained into the high priesthood. The symbolism is obvious. He must be washed clean of all pollution and He must come humbly. But he must also come in clothing fit for a priest.

This is all summed up in the second of the “B” pairing (vv. 32-33). “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.” Did you see that? Atonement is made not just for people, but for the entire sanctuary, everything that is in it or comes into it. We will see it as we get deeper into the chapter. Heiser calls it a “reset” for everything that will appease God’s wrath for the coming year.

### *The Peoples’ Duty (C, C<sup>1</sup> – 16:5, 29-31)*

The first order of business will be to make an offering for the people. “He shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a purification/sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering” (Lev 16:5). This

is similar to the previous in that there is one **ram**, but differs in that there is no bull, but rather, **two goats**. The reason will become clear momentarily. But again, I'm taking us through the chapter through the chiasm rather than verse by verse.

The parallel is tremendously important. The people were to provide this offering, because it was **to atone for them**. But **they have responsibilities too**. The "C" pair ends, "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" (29-31).

This passage gives us **the date** of the ceremony. It is the **tenth day of the new year**. In real time, this would have been a mere **two days after Nadab and Abihu** were killed. God was taking care of the contaminating effects of their sin quickly! Given that the two sons have still just passed down into Sheol, the realm of the dead, it is no wonder that Aaron obeyed God. It showed his great faith in the God who had just taken his two oldest sons from him.

The duty of the people is straightforward. They had to **afflict themselves**. This is a special idiom (*'innah nefesh*) in the Hebrew Bible, and it always refers to **fasting** (**Isa 58:3, 10; Ps 35:13**). It is **a self-denial**. The Rabbis taught that you denied yourself food and drink, bathing, oil, shoes, and sexual intercourse. But it seems to me that it is deeper than skin. This is meant to go to the heart.

The Psalmist uses the phrase and says, “**I wore sackcloth, I afflicted myself with fasting, I prayed with my head bowed on my bosom**” (**Ps 53:13**). Wenham says it well. “**However impressive the ceremonies enacted by the high priest to atone for sin may be, they were insufficient. The law insists that if they are to be effective, the whole nation, Israelites and foreigners alike, must demonstrate true penitence.**”<sup>17</sup> This is about **repentance**, turning from sin as symbolized in the self-affliction. It is not merely about externals, but internals. The heart has to be afflicted, not just the body.

This was to be an activity that lasted **the whole day**, for this was no ordinary day. Rather, it was **a sabbath**. They “**shall do not work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you**” (**Lev 16:29**). Resting, like God did

---

<sup>17</sup> **Gordon J. Wenham**, *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 236.

after he created his earth-sanctuary. This would be a middle-of-the-week sabbath (sabbaths can occur on many days, not just the seventh day). In fact, it was to be viewed as “a Sabbath of *solemn rest*” (31) or as the LXX translates it, “The Sabbath of Sabbaths,” which may be why it is simply called “Yoma,” “The Day” by the Rabbis.

And why? “For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins” (30). You were supposed to reflect upon what God was doing for you and your people just then, as the offerings were being made. You were to internalize God’s grace in resetting your negligence and forgiving your transgressions. It was to be solemn and sobering as you considered who you are before a Holy God and why he would go out of his way to so graciously give you a new year with him in your midst.

### *Two Goats (D, D<sup>1</sup> – 16:10, 26-28)*

The “D” pair now goes into detail about how the offerings are to be made. First, Aaron must offer the bull as a purification/sin offering for himself (6). The high priest is a sinner, as we saw with Aaron at the golden calf and will

learn about him later in Numbers when he defies Moses and God will not let him enter the Promised Land. But he is also a **finite**, created being who is **susceptible to all those contagions** we have seen in this book. He is not merely morally unclean, but often ritually unclean. With the amount of detail his job would have entailed, given simply his finitude, I do not think he was capable of doing everything exactly right. But if he just left out one ceremony or forgot to sprinkle something just the right way, he would allow contagion into the sanctuary and onto himself. So he offers a bull for **himself and for his house** (his sons, the priests, his wife, etc.).

After this, he is to take the **two goats** and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting in the courtyard (7). Then he is to **cast lots** over the two goats. One goat is “**for the LORD**” and the other is “**for Azazel**,” or as some translates say, “for the scapegoat” (8). There is a lot going on here and we will spend an entire sermon thinking about it in a couple of weeks. All I want to say here is that the LORD and Azazel are **two opposite ideas**, but that you cannot understand the Day of Atonement ritual by only thinking about one goat or the other. They work together. As Morales says, “the **scapegoat’s role should be understood**

in conjunction with that of the goat that is sacrificed ... both goats together [refer to] a single purification offering.”<sup>18</sup> These are not two different offerings, but “two male goats for a sin offering [singular]” (5).

What is the function of each goat? The one whose lot went for the LORD becomes the purification goat (9). It is killed in the courtyard and offered up. “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” (10). One goat dies and the other lives; one is for the LORD and the other is for Azazel.

The goats return in the second of the “D” pair. “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” (26). Something has happened that has made the man unclean. He has gone outside the camp, to the place of impurities. The second goat, along with the bull, were both killed and offered to the LORD. “Their blood made atonement in the Holy Place.” Those bodies are carried outside the camp as well, where the skin and flesh and dung are all burned up with fire (27). It is interesting that both

---

<sup>18</sup> Morales, 178-79.

goats end up outside the camp. And then, as before, the one who burns them has to wash his clothes and bathe in water and then he can return to the camp (28).

### *Bull and Burnt Offering (E, E<sup>1</sup> -16:11-14, 23-25)*

We haven't seen the bull have to die yet. This is taken up in vv. 11-14. It is ironic that Aaron, who made the golden calf, should have to offer up a bull. Why? Because this is “for himself” (11). “For himself” appears three times in vs. 11. It is a purification/sin offering “for himself.” It makes atonement “for himself and for his house.” He kills it at a sin offering “for himself.”

Then, he takes a censer of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD (the place Nadab and Abihu were supposed to take their fire from), because this is the fire that came down from heaven and was lit by the LORD himself. He takes two handfuls of sweet incense and brings it to the veil (12). He puts the incense on the fire “before the LORD” (13). Aaron is now very close to the Presence. I wonder what he was thinking? Was he terrified? His incense creates a cloud and covers the mercy seat “that is over the testimony”

(that is the Ten Commandments contained in the ark). This cloud **keeps him from dying** (13).

Aaron now, ever so carefully, as he is standing in the immediate frontal presence of the visible Yahweh, indeed at his very feet, takes some of the blood of the bull and sprinkles it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, right where Yahweh is watching him! He does this **seven times** (14).

The second of the pair tells us what he is to do when he leaves God's presence when the ritual is over. He is to come into the tent of meeting and **take off the linen garments** that he put on when he went into the Holy Place. He must leave them there (23). Then he must **bathe** his body in water "**in a holy place**" and put on his garments and come out and offer the burnt offering for himself and another for the people and so make atonement for both (24), burning the fat on the altar, because it is a pleasing aroma to the LORD (25).

### *Two Goats Explained (F, F<sup>1</sup> – 15, 20b-22)*

We are now at **the penultimate place of the entire Pentateuch**. It returns us to the **two goats**. The first is the one killed as a purification/sin offering for the people (15).



Its blood is to be brought by Aaron inside the veil and its blood is to be sprinkled over the mercy seat just like the bulls was for his own sin.

The other goat is presented live (20). Aaron is to lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities (*avon*) of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions (*pesha*), all their sins (*chattath*). He was to spend some time on this. It was to be both general and specific. This shows you how intimately involved the idea of confessing and repenting of sins is in this ritual.

When he is finished, he is to transfer those sins to the head of the goat through the laying on of hands and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness (21). “Wilderness” is symbolic of the *tohu* and *bohu* of Genesis 1:2. It is chaos. It is cursed. The man in readiness refers to a man appointed and designated to carry out this special task.

It says then that “The goat shall bear all their iniquities (*avon*) on itself to a remote area and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness” (22). “Remote area” (*gezerah*) is literally separation, “the region that is cut off” or “a land of cutting off.” In this way, the sins of Israel are lifted off of the people and placed onto a substitute who is cursed and led

outside the camp to a faraway place where **the sins will be forgotten** by the LORD once-for-all. They are also no longer in the camp. They are out there, where they belong, and when we look at Azazel in a coming week, you will see just how powerful that imagery is. The picture is beautiful if not also a bit terrifying in what had to happen for this forgiveness to occur.

### *Atonement (X – 16-20a)*

This takes us to **the heart of the Books of Moses**, to **the literary center** of Leviticus, to **the Most Holy Place** where God himself resides between the cherubim. It takes us to **the place Adam was cast out of**, not allowed back in by guardian cherubs holding flaming swords. It takes us to **the reversal of the curse**, and perhaps the greatest grace in the OT Levitical covenant.

“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” (16). This atonement is for **both ritual and moral** impurity. It purges both man and house. All is made clean and fit for God’s presence to dwell in again.

“So he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleanness” (16). The tent must be atoned. “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” (17). Only the High Priest has been set apart for this most special service. “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” (18). He is going in; he is coming out. The entire precinct must be purged and atoned. “And he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel” (19). Seven, the number of perfection. Thus he shall make an end for the year “of atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar” (20).

Thus, the goal Adam failed to procure, is reversed. Sin is cast out. Whatever they had forgotten or neglected or didn't confess or whatever was forgiven. All the people could start over with a clean slate. Israel is reset. Their sins for the past

year would not be counted against them. God would dwell among them in peace.

## Christ has Ascended the Holy Hill

But even this was far from a permanent solution. It was merely a type and shadow. More was needed. Recall again the Psalm. **Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?** Who shall go into the Holy of Holies, the parallel to the top of the mountain? Only the one with **clean hands** and unfaltering lips and a circumcised heart. This ritual had to be enacted every single year, on the same day, over and over and over again. Because in truth, no one had yet been found who could ascend that hill. There had to be a High Priest who was worthy.

But this is why we must read the Day of Atonement in light of **the coming of Jesus Christ**. As Hebrews, ala the Psalms, teaches us, he is a **greater high priest** than Aaron, for his priesthood is from the eternal lineage of Melchizedek. But this high priest offered up an atoning **sacrifice once-for-all**. He did it with the **body prepared for him**, with a **garment of praise** and a **beautiful headdress** and a **robe of righteousness**. He did it on the **mountain** (Calvary). He

became a **curse** upon a tree. He was the **substitute**, bearing our iniquities in his own body, suffering the fate of the goats and bulls, as a lamb that was slain, **outside the camp, cut off** from the land of the living. He gave himself over to death and found himself even in that place of wandering souls in the Sheol, the watery abyss, the realm of dead where all men went when they died.

But in that Psalm that asks such a question, **gates are told to raise their head**. “**Lift up your head, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in**” (**Ps 24:9**). This is not the gates of heaven, as you might suppose. It is the gates of Sheol (Gk: hades, Engl: hell), the place of chaos and suffering and misery and curse. Those gates are not shouting in victory, but in terror. They are not wanting the king to come; he is demanding they open up and let him in. For he was about to break the bars, open the doors, and set the prisoners free.

For in his death, **full atonement was made**. Death would not be allowed to keep any of the saints in Abraham’s bosom. The types and shadows had given way to the victory of the lamb that stands, risen. All of the prophecies that have such things in mind bid you to look to the **Messiah**, the one who has ended the long night of sin, and in his resurrection

ushered in cleanness in the light of a new day. The Light of Christ is the Day of Atonement. Look to him. Humble yourself before the king of Glory who has won the victory. The Second Adam entered into the Most Holy Place in heaven above with an offering fully acceptable to God, having cast out the Evil One and defeated sin and death. Know the cost your uncleanness and sin has demanded. But see the grace of God in Christ. It appears now to your eyes, through faith. Humble yourself in confession and repentance and find joy and forgiveness and thankfulness and hope in the one who has made a full atonement. Can it be? Hallelujah, what a Savior.

### **Select Bibliography**

Beale, G. K. "Eden, The Temple, and the Church's Mission in the New Creation," *JETS* 48:1 (2005): 5-32.

Heiser, Michael. *Notes on Leviticus*. Naked Bible Podcast. Blindspot Press, 2017.

Kline, Moshe. "The Literary Structure of Leviticus." *The Biblical Historian* 2/3 (2006): 1-28.

- Morales, L. Michael *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?: A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 37, *New Studies in Biblical Theology*. England; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 2015.
- Leder, A. C. *Waiting for the Land: The Story Line of the Pentateuch*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010.
- Levine, Baruch A. *Leviticus*. The JPS Torah Commentary. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989.
- Wenham, Gordon J. *The Book of Leviticus*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979.