

‘The Day of Atonement’.

Today (28 September) marks the most important and the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, that of the annual Day of Atonement.¹

On the original *God-appointed* Day of Atonement, upwards of fifteen animal sacrifices were slaughtered and offered up to God; lambs, rams, goats and young bulls.²

But throughout this year’s *Jewish* Day of Atonement not one sacrifice is being offered. And this for the simple reason that, ever since A.D. 70, the people of Israel have had no Temple where they might legitimately offer any animal sacrifice to God.³ In that sense, the destruction of the Second Temple by the forces of the then Roman general Titus well and truly pulled the rug out from under the feet of Judaism. As I see it, for the past 1950 years their Day of Atonement has been just an empty shell.⁴

Today, as on every recent Day of Atonement, congregations in Jewish synagogues will recite the words, ‘O Lord ... when *of old* your tabernacle was in Salem, its sacred service made atonement for the transgressions of [Israel] ... *now* we are exiles from your dwelling ... we pour forth prayer ... O Holy One, regard it as a sacrifice of burnt offering’.

Pious Jews will then claim, ‘This day you will cleanse us from all our sins, as it is written in your Law, “For on that day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you”’. But that biblical quotation comes from the closing section of Leviticus 16⁵ and follows hard on the heels of God’s stipulations about the many blood sacrifices which *had* to be offered on the Day.⁶

But that which is a loss to Judaism (in that the people of Israel now have no Temple, High Priest, or sacrifices) is a cause of great rejoicing and praise to us Christians. For, whereas Israel has nothing to replace its obsolescent sacrificial system, we glory in the fact that we have that which is infinitely ‘greater’ and ‘better’.

For we know that the Day of Atonement was simply a picture which pointed forward to the one great and unique sacrifice offered for us by our Lord Jesus, and that, along with the whole Jewish sacrificial system, it came to an end because it had served its purpose, and had received its fulfilment in His sacrificial work.

So today, on this year’s Day of Atonement, *let us ponder a few of the contrasts* which the writer to the Hebrews draws between the picture and the reality, between the shadow and the substance, between the type and the antitype ... *between Israel’s first High Priest, Aaron, and our Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus.*

(i) **Where** he/He went. Having sacrificed sin offerings and burnt offerings at the brazen altar, Aaron ‘passed through’ the court of the tabernacle, through the first veil, through the holy place, through the second veil, into the very inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle (into ‘the holiest of all’⁷), there to sprinkle blood both on and before the mercyseat, where the Lord of hosts dwelt between the cherubim.⁸ It was a tremendous privilege! But, as the writer to the Hebrews stressed, that which Aaron entered was only an ‘earthly sanctuary’.⁹

Whereas Jesus, our Great High Priest, has ‘passed through’, not the various successive compartments of some earthly, man-made structure (whether that of Tabernacle or Temple), but ‘the heavens’,¹⁰ to enter that ‘greater and more perfect Tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation’.¹¹ ‘For Christ’, we are assured, ‘is not entered into the Holy Places made with hands, which are the figures (‘the patterns’) of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us’.¹²

(ii) **When** he/He went. The main biblical passage on the Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16, closes with the statement, ‘to make an atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins *once a year*’. This point is picked up by the writer to the Hebrews, who twice observes in chapter 9 that Israel’s High Priest entered the Most Holy Place ‘*every year*’,¹³ having first brought what he described as ‘those sacrifices which they offered *year by year*’.¹⁴

As the writer notes, in the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement there was ‘a remembrance¹⁵ again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins’.¹⁶ Make no mistake ... there was no triumphant cry ‘It is finished!’ on the Day of Atonement!

But our Lord Jesus, ‘entered in *once* into the Holy Place, having obtained eternal redemption’,¹⁷ for ‘Christ was *once* offered to bear the sins of many’.¹⁸

(iii) **Whose** blood he/He offered – and for **whom**. Aaron entered 'the Holy Place every year with *the blood of others*',¹⁹ namely that 'of bulls and goats'.²⁰ But of our Lord Jesus we read, 'neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by *His own blood* He entered into the Holy Place'.²¹ Whereas Aaron shed the blood of unsuspecting animals, our Lord Jesus was a willing Victim, One who 'offered Himself'.²²

And, because Aaron was, like me, a sinner, he needed to offer a sin offering '*for himself*' as well as for others before he ever dared enter God's presence.²³ But our Lord Jesus, who was 'without spot',²⁴ needed no sin offering; He was 'once offered to bear the sins *of many*'.²⁵

(iv) **Who** he/He enabled to follow him/Him into God's presence. In Aaron's case – nobody! For we read that 'into the second part the High Priest went *alone* once a year'.²⁶ Only Israel's High Priest dared enter the Most Holy Place.

But our Lord Jesus has entered 'into that within the veil' as *our forerunner*,²⁷ opening up for us 'a new and living way' by which we have 'boldness to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus'.²⁸

Just think! We enter the same place, and by the same route, as the Lord Jesus Himself, for it was 'by His own blood *He* entered in once into the Holy Place'.²⁹

'Since Christ has entered by His blood
The holiest on high;
By that same hallowed, blood-stained track,
Thou welcomest the wanderer back,
And biddest me draw nigh'.³⁰

Israel can keep its bloodless Day of Atonement ... ***I'll settle for the finished work of Christ.***

Notes

¹ Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement) for the Hebrew Year 5781 begins at sundown on Sunday, 27 September 2020 and ends at nightfall on Monday, 28 September 2020. Although the Day of Atonement ranks as probably the most important and holy of Israel's festivals, it is far from being a 'feast' in the normal sense of the word. On this day the people were to 'afflict' their souls (Lev. 16. 29, 31; 23. 27, 32), an expression indicating that they were to humble themselves by fasting and other penitential exercises. For this reason, 'the Day of Atonement' is described in the New Testament as 'the fast' (Acts 27. 9). It was the only day of national humiliation commanded by God in the Law of Moses.

² At least fifteen beasts were slaughtered at different times during the day. (i) There were two lambs, one offered in the morning, and the other in the evening. These were never omitted, being a perpetual ordinance, Exod. 29. 38-42; Num. 28. 3-6. (ii) Numb. 29. 7-11, 'You shall present a burnt offering to the Lord as a sweet aroma: one young bull, one ram, and seven lambs in their first year ... also one kid of the goats as a sin offering, besides the sin offering for atonement, the regular burnt offering with its grain offering, and their drink offerings'. That is, one bullock, one ram, seven lambs, and one kid of the goats; totalling ten. (iii) Leviticus 16. 3, 'a young bullock for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering', with verses 9-10 speaking of two goats, one of which was killed. There were therefore fifteen beasts slaughtered, besides the later burnt offerings of thanksgiving.

The Day of Atonement cleansed both the tabernacle and the people, because the people's sins both (i) contaminated the tabernacle and the altar and (ii) rendered the people unclean. The slaughtered sin offering focused on the uncleanness and the scapegoat on the people's iniquities. I note the movement from Aaron and his house, Lev 16. 11-15, to the Holy Place and Tent of Meeting, vv. 16-17, to the altar, vv. 18-19, and then to the whole community, vv. 21-22.

³ The sacrifices were so important that the Law of God dedicates some 26 full chapters to them.

⁴ I find it quite moving to read some of the literature written by modern Jews as they attempt to explain and defend what they do now – what they will do later this week.

For example, the main Jewish Encyclopaedia acknowledges that the ending of the sacrificial system 'in consequence of the destruction of the Temple, came ... as a shock to the people', adding that, 'in the course of time the whole Temple ritual was taken symbolically, with more stress laid on the fasting, the prayers, and the supplications to which the people devoted the whole day'. That article goes so far as to claim that 'it was after the destruction of the Temple ... that the Day of Atonement assumed its high spiritual character ...'. But God never changed or withdrew His requirement for a blood atonement.

(The extracts come from ... <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com> - under the article 'Atonement'. See also C. G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings*, pages 393, 394.)

To observe a bloodless Day of Atonement is like celebrating the Passover without a slain lamb, or like Christians celebrating the Lord's Supper with no bread and no cup.

⁵ Lev. 16. 30.

⁶ *'Service of the Synagogue. A New Edition of Festival Prayers. Day of Atonement. Part II'*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, pages 57 and 100; cf. pages 248 and 260, and 'You have given us in love, O Lord our God, this Day of Atonement for pardon, forgiveness and atonement, that we may obtain pardon on it for all our iniquities', page 257.

⁷ Heb. 9. 3, 8.

⁸ 1 Sam. 4. 4.

⁹ Heb. 9. 1.

¹⁰ Heb. 4. 14. The correct translation is 'passed *through* the heavens'.

¹¹ Heb. 9. 11.

¹² Heb. 9. 24.

¹³ Heb. 9. 7, 25.

¹⁴ Heb. 10. 1. On the Day of Atonement, the High priest went in more than once into the Holiest, Lev. 16. 12, 14, 15 (once with incense, then twice with blood, first, of the bullock and, second, of the sin-offering goat).

¹⁵ The word 'remembrance' is found in only one other context in the New Testament – that of the Lord's Supper. 'Do this in remembrance of me', the Lord Jesus says, 1 Cor. 11. 24-25. Whereas the animal sacrifices of the original Day of Atonement served to bring sins to remembrance, the bread and wine serve to bring to remembrance (not sins but) Him who, by His infinitely better and greater sacrifice (by His once-for-all and perfect sacrifice), has put sins away forever.

If in the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement there was 'a remembrance of sins made every year', our Lord's death dealt with sins finally and conclusively. So that, under the terms of the New Covenant, God now says, 'Their sins and their iniquities will I remember (against them) no more', Heb. 10. 17.

¹⁶ Heb. 10. 3-4.

¹⁷ Heb. 9. 12.

¹⁸ Heb. 9. 28. The expression 'once for all' translates the same word which was used by Abishai in the Greek Old Testament when he stood over the sleeping form of King Saul with Saul's spear in his hand, where he said to David, 'I will smite him to the earth with the spear to the ground once for all, and I will not smite him again', 1 Sam. 16. 8. The word speaks of that which doesn't need to be repeated, of that which is done once, and never done again.

¹⁹ Heb. 9. 25.

²⁰ Heb. 10. 4.

²¹ Heb. 9. 12.

²² Heb. 9. 14; cf. 7. 27; 9. 26.

²³ Heb. 9. 7.

²⁴ Heb. 9. 14.

²⁵ Heb. 9. 28. The animal blood shed by Aaron sufficed to make the worshipper externally and ceremonially clean, but the blood of Jesus cleanses the conscience of the worshipper.

²⁶ Heb. 9. 7; cf. 'There shall be no man in the tent of meeting when 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', Lev. 16. 17.

²⁷ Heb. 6. 19-20.

²⁸ Heb. 10. 19.

²⁹ Heb. 9. 12. I take 'by His blood' to indicate 'by the merits of His sacrifice'.

³⁰ Hymn, '*The blood of Christ, Thy spotless Lamb*', by William S. W. Pond.