

'The Day of Atonement'. Bethesda meditation. 23 September 2007.

Hymn : *'The blood of Christ, Thy spotless Lamb'*, W. S. Pond

I don't know whether you were aware of it but yesterday was the most important day in the Jewish calendar – that of the annual Day of Atonement.¹

Taking account of all the relevant biblical passages which set out God's requirements for the day, we find that, on the original Day of Atonement, Aaron the High Priest was responsible for offering *many* sacrifices – indeed, I reckon that there must have been upwards of fifteen animals slaughtered that day – lambs, young bulls, rams and goats.²

Apart from which, Aaron was required to lay both his hands on the head of a live goat – to confess over it all the iniquities, transgressions and sins of the children of Israel³ - and to send the goat away into the desolate wilderness by the hand of a chosen man.

But throughout *this year's* Day of Atonement *not one* sacrifice was offered. For, since AD 70, the people of Israel have had no Temple where they could legitimately offer any animal sacrifice to God.⁴ And, in that sense, AD 70 pulled the rug well and truly out from under the feet of Judaism – and their Day of Atonement for the past 1937 years has been just an empty shell. For to observe a *bloodless* Day of Atonement is like celebrating the Passover *without a lamb* – or like having a Breaking of Bread meeting *with neither bread nor cup*.

And I find it quite moving to read their literature as modern Jews attempt to explain and defend what they now do – and did again yesterday.

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'. The Encyclopaedia 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 ...' – which, given that God has never changed His requirement for a blood atonement⁵, ranks as rather blasphemous, but is probably the best and bravest face they can put on their present predicament.⁶

And, to this very day, every Day of Atonement congregations in Jewish synagogues 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 ... Let the prayer ... be sweeter than the savour of a whole burnt offering' – and then presume to claim that, 'This day you will cleanse us from all our sins, as it is written in your law, on that day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you' – quoting from the closing section of Lev. 16. 30 – which, in fact, follows on closely behind the many blood sacrifices offered on the Day.⁷

You can almost sense the awkwardness and embarrassment that Judaism feels in having no Temple, no High Priest and therefore no sacrifices. But what to them is a difficulty and an embarrassment is to us as Christians a cause of great rejoicing and praise. For, whereas Israel lost its sacrificial system with nothing to replace it, we glory in the fact that we have something infinitely 'greater' and 'better'.

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

And what a delight it is for us this morning to note just 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.

We can think, for instance, of :

(i) Where Aaron went. For, having sacrificed sin offerings and burnt offerings at the brazen altar, *he '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 holy of holies to sprinkle blood both on and before the mercyseat, where the Lord of hosts dwelt between the cherubim, 1 Sam. 4. 4. It was a tremendous privilege! But, as the writer to the Hebrews stressed, Aaron entered only an 'earthly sanctuary', Heb. 9. 1.*

Whereas Jesus, our Great High Priest, has passed – not through the various successive compartments of some earthly, man-made structure – whether tabernacle or temple – but through the heavens, Heb. 4. 14 – to enter that 'greater and more perfect tabernacle *not* made with hands, that is, not of this creation', Heb. 9. 11 ... 'For Christ 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', v. 24.

(ii) When Aaron went. The main biblical passage on the Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16, closes with the statement, 'to make atonement for the children of Israel, for all their sins, *once a year*'. And the writer picks this up, twice observing that the high priest entered the Most Holy Place '*every year*', Heb. 9. 7, 25, after bringing, he says, the 'same sacrifices' which were offered '*continually year by year*', Heb. 10. 1.

But our Lord Jesus, as the writer says, 'entered the Most Holy Place *once for all*, having obtained eternal redemption', Heb. 9. 12 – for 'Christ was offered *once for all* to bear the sins of many', Heb. 9. 28. 'Once for all' – the word used by Jude in verse 3 of his letter, when he speaks of 'the faith which was *once for all* delivered to the saints', and 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 and 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. 26. 8.⁸ The word speaks of that which doesn't need to be repeated – that which is done once and never again.

(iii) Whose blood Aaron offered – and for whom. The writer draws our attention to the fact that Aaron entered 'the Most Holy Place every year with the blood of others' – with 'blood *not his own*', Heb. 9. 25 – in detail, with the blood 'of bulls and goats', Heb. 10. 4. And the writer points us to our Lord Jesus, saying, '*Not* with the blood of goats and calves, but with *His own blood* He entered the Most Holy Place', Heb. 9. 12. For whereas Aaron shed the blood of unsuspecting animals, our Lord Jesus was a *willing* Victim – who *willingly* entered the world to do God's *will* in offering up Himself, Heb. 9. 14; 10. 5-10.

And, because Aaron was, like us, a sinner, he needed to offer a sin offering 'for himself' as well as for others before he could enter God's presence, Heb. 9. 7. But our Lord Jesus, who was 'without sin' and 'without spot', needed no sin offering and was 'offered once to bear the sins of many', Heb. 9. 28.

Who Aaron enabled and equipped to follow him into God's presence. In a word – nobody! For we read that 'into the second part the high priest went *alone* once a year', Heb. 9. 7. Only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place. He dare not lead others there. But our Lord Jesus has opened up for us 'a new and living way' that we too may approach. So that we have boldness – confidence - to enter the holiest 'by ('through, by means of) the blood of Jesus', Heb. 10. 19. What a joy to think that we enter *the same place*, and *by the same route*, as our Lord Jesus Himself - for it was 'through his own blood', we read, that He Himself entered once for all into the holy place, Heb. 9. 12.⁹

In the words of verse 3 of our opening hymn :

*'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'.*

What Aaron accomplished by the many sacrifices. 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, Heb. 9. 13-14.

As the writer notes, in the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement there was 'a remembrance of sins made every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins', Heb. 10. 3-4.¹⁰

The repeated sacrifices of the annual Day of Atonement proved that, in the sight of God, the blood of the sacrificial victims was unable to remove and take away sins. Indeed, as the writer says, they could '*never* take away sins', Heb. 10. 11 – and 'never' is a long time! It was 'not possible' for them to do so, Heb. 10. 3. They only settled the account for the past twelve months. There was no triumphant cry of 'It is finished!' on the Day of Atonement!

But, 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 I will remember (against them) no more', Heb. 10. 17.

And I note that the word 'remembrance' in the expression 'remembrance of sins' is found in only one other context in the New Testament. And that is in the context of the Lord's Supper. 'Do this in remembrance of me', the Lord Jesus says. And so, whereas the animal sacrifices of the original Day of Atonement served to bring *sins* to remembrance, the bread and wine this morning 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 for ever.

Let us sing verses 1 and 2 of **Hymn 139** – and rejoice in the words of Horatius Bonar ...

'No blood, no altar now;
The sacrifice is o'er'.

And Israel can keep its bloodless Day of Atonement

Endnotes

¹ Technically, from sunset on Friday September 21 to nightfall on Saturday September 22.

² The Day of Atonement cleansed both the tabernacle and the people – for 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, vv. 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.

It seems that 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 records God's requirement, '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 refers to, '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.

³ This second goat was both a *sin-bearer*, Lev.16. 21, and a *sin-remover*, Lev.16. 22.

⁴ The sacrifices were so important that the Law of God dedicates some 26 full chapters to them.

⁵ That the Levitical system was intended by God to continue until our Lord died is clear, for example, from our Lord's words to the cleansed leper in Matthew 8.4.

⁶ The extracts come from ... <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com> - under the article 'Atonement'.

⁷ 'Service of the Synagogue. A New Edition of Festival Prayers. Day of Atonement. Part II', Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, pages 57, 248, 260. See also '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.

⁸ The word occurs only fifteen times in the entire New Testament – eight of which are found in Hebrews. It is the word of Gen. 18. 32 LXX, 'Will there be anything against me, Lord, if I speak yet *once*?'

⁹ I take 'through His blood' to mean 'by the merits of His sacrifice'.

¹⁰ There is much scholarly debate over the underlying meaning of the Hebrew word 'atonement'. As far as I can tell, the latest scholarly opinion favours – not 'cover' – but rather either the meaning 'ransom' or 'wipe away, wipe clean'. See TWOT, number 1023; NIDOTTE, number 4105/4106. See too TDNT, volume III, pages 302 etc. For my part, I am not convinced, and still incline towards the root meaning of 'to cover'. (In spite of the dismissive comments of Richard Averbeck in NIDOTTE, I still consider the use of the word in Gen. 6. 14 as a respectable argument.)