
Christian Holidays: Day of Atonement

by: Ronald L. Dart

In the autumn of every year the Jews celebrate their most solemn Festival, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Would it surprise you to learn that Yom Kippur is a Christian holiday as well? The New Testament Church observed the day, only with a different sense of meaning. Very few Christians today take any note of the day at all, and that is surprising since the day is all about the ministry, life and work of Jesus Christ. Christians cheerfully celebrate Easter, which is not in the Bible at all, and they ignore the Day of Atonement, which is not only Biblical, it lies right at the heart of the meaning of the Christian faith.

Maybe it's because observing the Day of Atonement requires a fast, but it is probably because no one ever thinks of it.

Fast and the Day of Atonement

So how can I say that Yom Kippur is a Christian holiday, as well as a Jewish holiday? I could point to Acts 27 where Luke mentions that sailing in the Mediterranean was dangerous because the fast was already past. That is a reference to the fast of the Day of Atonement which comes at the beginning of the stormy seas in that part of the world. You will find that in Acts 27:9. I think it's better than merely looking at a passing reference like that. to look at the Christian significance of the day.

The Early Church was Jewish

During the entire period, in which the entire New Testament was written, the Church not only continued to observe the seventh days Sabbath, but they observed these festivals and holidays of the Bible as well. That shouldn't really surprise anyone. In the early years the Church was entirely Jewish. There were a few proselytes that had come along from Gentiles as well, but for all intents and purposes the whole Church was Jewish. They didn't change any of their customs. They certainly didn't change their God, but they began to see in the old customs a new significance in those customs as time went by. The peculiarity of the New Testament is, that it is not a systematic dissertation on the theology of the early Church, it is a collection of ad hoc writings that were originally intended for living first century Christians to solve problems

All those people had a background into which these letters fit, and they tended to understand them a little differently from us. They took the Old Testament for granted.

Paul wrote to Timothy and said in 2 Timothy 3 verse 14 "Continue you in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing of whom you have learned them, {15} and that from a child you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. {16} All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, {17} that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly equipped for all good works."

Old Testament

One thing you have to realize is that the Holy Scriptures that Timothy knew from his childhood were those that we call the Old Testament. Surprising isn't it that Paul writes to Timothy concerning what we call the Old Testament and says from a child "You have known these Scriptures which are able to make you wise unto salvation." All of their authority came from the Old Testament. The New Testament is repleat with references to the Old Testament. I think in the book of Romans Paul has 46 direct citations from the Old Testament. Actually, the Old Testament was the only written authority they had. If you wanted to cite a written authority, when Paul was writing his letters, the only place he could go was to the Old Testament. Everything else was the words of Jesus which they had memorized and of which they quoted. Occasionally writers of the New Testament books launched in explanations of the Old Testament that opened up avenues of thought that we modern readers otherwise might never notice or never know.

The Book of Hebrews

There is for example in the book of Hebrews, a commentary on the Tabernacle ceremony on the Day of Atonement, which is what I'm driving at in this article and I think it would be easy for a reader who was familiar with the Old Testament to sail right through this and never realize what it is that he is reading. Now we are not sure who wrote the book of Hebrews, but the most common attribution is to the apostle Paul

Jesus Christ is our High Priest

The subject throughout the book is Christ, His divinity, and His priesthood, and he is at some pains in the book to establish that Jesus is our high priest. Even though in the flesh he comes from the tribe of Judah, and not Levi (Hebrews 7:14).

In the process of explaining and developing the idea of the priesthood of Christ, he incidentally gives us a Christian commentary on the Day of Atonement, that is Yom Kippur, and tells us what it actually means to a Christian.

To write to the Christian Church and take the pains to tell them what the Day of Atonement means to Christians should be suggestive. Before, we look at that, let's look at the original Commandment for the Day of atonement and see what's there.

Day of Atonement Ordained

You will find it in the 23rd chapter of Leviticus along with the rest of the holidays of the Bible. You will find it beginning in verse 27 "On the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement." Actually, another word for that might be "the Day of Reconciliation". "It shall be a holy convocation for you." That means that you go to church and have an assembly. "You shall afflict your souls." That means you fast. "You shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. {28} "You shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God." This is one day in the year when all of the Israelites came together to be reconciled to God and consequently to one another

Verse 29 "Whatsoever soul it be that shall not be afflicted." That means to fast, "in that same day, he shall be cut off from among his people. {30} And whatsoever soul it be that does any work in that same day, the same soul will I destroy from among his people. {31} You shall do no manner of work: it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings." No matter where you live and for all of eternity, {32} "It shall be to you a Sabbath of rest, and you shall afflict your souls." You shall fast. "In the ninth day of the month at even, from even unto even, shall you celebrate your Sabbath."

It's interesting to note the little extra phrase "from even unto even" that indicates exactly how long you are supposed to keep this holiday is included here, where it is not on the other holidays. I think it may have something to do with impressing upon your mind not to cut that fast short or started late.

What Does the Day of Atonement Have to Do with Christianity?

Now here's a question, what does all this have to do with Christianity? That is something that the author of the book of Hebrews is going to tell us.

The section that I want to look at in Hebrews begins in chapter 9. This is part of a much longer discussion about the priesthood of Christ, the service of Christ and all that He did. The author of Hebrews finds it necessary to digress a little bit and explain some things to us about the ordinances of divine service in the Tabernacle in ancient times.

He says in Hebrews 9:1 "Verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary."

In other words, this is something on earth that we go to and something we do.

He said {2} "There was a Tabernacle made; the first, wherein was the candlestick, and the table, and the showbread; which is called the sanctuary. {3} And after the second veil, the Tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all."

The layout of the Tabernacles was actually pretty simple. If you have a piece of paper, you could draw a rectangle with a ratio of two by one and it is composed of two squares, each of them the same size, and one of the squares is a holy place and the other square is the holy of holies or the

holiest place of all. The outer area which the priests could go to any time was the one where there was a candlestick and table and showbread and so forth.

The holy of holies {4} "Which had the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant overlaid roundabout with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; {5} And over it the cherubim of glory shadowing the mercy seat; of which we cannot now speak particularly. {6} Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests could always go into the first Tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God. {7} But into the second one, the holy of holies, the high priest could only go once every year alone. He did not go in without blood, because he had to offer it for himself, and for the errors of the people: {8} The Holy Spirit signified by this, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first Tabernacle was yet standing."

Now this last section here is really interesting because when he says that the Holy Spirit is signifying, he has told us something very important. What he is saying is that the very layout of the Tabernacle, the structure of it, and the service that the priest did in there was done by the direction of the Holy Spirit to signify something. The whole thing had meaning. The Holy Spirit signified something in the order of service of the old Tabernacle. In this case that man did not have complete access to God during the time of the Tabernacle, he was showing us this, that man's access to God is limited in the old times, but it's going to be different. The Tabernacle was like a stage upon which the drama of the plan of God was played out in the ceremonies that were performed there. Everything they did had meaning and you see that by the time the book of Hebrews was written, the apostles were beginning to see, perhaps in ways they never had seen before, how that all of the ceremonies were played out on the stage of the Tabernacle which pointed, of all places to Jesus Christ.

The writer of Hebrews continues in chapter 9:9 The old Tabernacle was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience."

The fact of the matter is these things were not so much for the heart, they were to teach.

Verse 10 "They stood only in meats and drinks, and diverse washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation."

Now here is where it gets connected to Christianity {11} "But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect Tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; {12} Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us."

Day of Atonement Ceremony

If we are going to understand what the author is talking about here, we are going to have to know a little more about the background of this. He is making an oblique reference to the ceremony that took place on the Day of Atonement, something his Hebrew readers would've understood quite well. I can easily understand how someone who knows nothing about the Old Testament, reading through Hebrews would totally be at sea on some of this. But a person who knew about the Day of Atonement and the ceremony would understand him quite well and would see quickly what he is driving at. This ceremony in question is described in great detail in the 16th chapter of the book of Leviticus.

These instructions come just after a tragic event when Aaron's two sons had decided to engage in some, what shall we call it, innovative worship at the Tabernacle. They had offered what the Bible calls strange fire, which is not that significant, it simply means they burned incense that they had no instructions to offer, at a time they had no business doing it. This is something that God had not designated. They decided that this would be a good idea, but they got too close to the power in the Tabernacle and got burned to a crisp for their trouble. The carried them away smoking wrapped in their coats.

In Leviticus 16:1 "God spoke to Moses "after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they offered before the LORD, and died; {2} And the LORD said unto Moses, Speak to Aaron your brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the veil before the mercy seat, which is upon the ark; that he die not: for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat."

Let's understand this. There is going to be an enormous amount of power there when God comes down there. The high priest is not to come in there just any time. If he does, he will die. It wasn't merely a matter of a bad-tempered God that would kill him. He was coming into the presence of enormous power. You don't roam among high tension lines without taking safety precautions.

Raiders of the Lost Ark

If you want an idea of how this works, you might see the movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark" for an idea. The scene at the end of the movie where they open the Ark will give you an idea of what it might have been like to look into the Ark, to deal with the Ark, and to do something that they were not supposed to do. This is quite a scene if you haven't seen it

Well in this case Aaron had to be prepared with certain offerings for purification. He had to be properly dressed. He had to take a bath and then put on the linen garments. Then he had to make certain offerings for himself and for his family. Aaron the high priest had to be ceremonially perfect, because in the ceremony he would represent Christ and his work.

The Two Goats

Once the high priest finished all of his preparations, {7} "He took two kids of the goats and he presented them before the Lord at the door of the Tabernacle. {8} Aaron then cast lots upon the two goats." One was for one purpose and the other was for another purpose. "One lot was selected for the LORD, and the other lot for the scapegoat."

It is from this particular passage that the word 'scapegoat' passes into our language.

Each of these two little goats had a role to play. First before he did anything with them, he took incense and put it on hot coals inside the holy of holies to generate a lot of smoke. God said he would appear there, and the smoke presumably would screen Aaron from the intense light of God's presence. Then he took the blood of the bullock, and he offered for himself and for his family making an atonement for them, sprinkling the blood of the bullock on the cover of the Ark. The first thing he has to do is make an atonement for himself because he has to represent Christ in the ceremony.

Now, it's worth taking a moment to note a play on words that takes place in this. Yom Kippur means literally the 'day of covering'. The making of an atonement in Hebrew is to make a covering or for covering up something, your sins. The word translated mercy seat in the Bible is actually cover. I don't know why they translated it as mercy seat, because there's no seat there. It is called cover and it specifies the lid on the Ark of the covenant.

He goes in and he sprinkles the blood of the bullock on the cover of the ark making a covering for the peoples' sins. Then he comes back outside and kills the goat that is for the Lord as a sin offering. He took that blood into the holy of holies and there he makes an atonement for the sins of all the children of Israel. For a Christian reader that all falls into place fairly quickly. First of all, he sanctifies himself, makes a covering for himself so that he can represent Christ, then representing Christ, he takes the blood of the goat for the Lord into the holy of holies and makes an atonement for the sins of all the children of Israel, which is precisely what Jesus Christ did (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Wave Sheaf Offering

In Christian typology, this is Christ, presenting His blood before the Father's throne, as an atonement for His people, the Church. This event, the actual event, not the ceremonial event, took place on the Sunday morning after the resurrection of Jesus. If you recall reading the New Testament account (John 20:11-18), Mary had come to the tomb early while it was still dark, and she sees somebody standing by the tomb and she thinks it is the gardener and after realizing the body is gone from the tomb she says to the gardener "Oh please sir, tell me where you took him, tell me where you laid him, I will take the body away and you won't have to worry about it." It wasn't the gardener, it was Jesus. He spoke to her and she said, "My Lord" and then He said, "Don't touch me for I have not yet ascended to my Father, to my God and to your God." Now later the same day (John 20:19), He allows His disciples to touch him, which basically says to me that between the time He talked to Mary and the time He talked to the disciples, He presented himself to the Father. That's when Jesus as the high priest took His blood before God, before the

mercy seat as it were, and made an atonement for His people. This was the fulfillment of the Wave Sheaf Offering in Leviticus 23:9-14.

Atonement for the Altar

When the high priest, representing Christ finished his part of the atonement, he returns to the people. The Scripture says in Leviticus 16 verse 18 "He shall go out to the altar that was before the Lord and make an atonement for it." He shall take the blood of the bullock, the blood of the goat and put it upon the horns of the altar all around. He sprinkles the blood upon it with His fingers seven times and cleanses it to hallow it from the uncleanness of the children of Israel. All of this seems strange in a way, because you would think that the altar of God is already holy and that there wouldn't be a need to make an atonement for that and the only way it seems to make any sense is that throughout the entirety of the year as people committed sins and came and offered sin offerings and the blood of the sin offerings were continually taken to the altar, that the altar itself becomes, in a sense, corrupted. And so, once a year, he actually has to make an atonement for the altar itself. He has to make an end of reconciling the holy place, the tent of meeting, the Tabernacle and the altar. In other words, the whole thing has to be reconciled to God once a year.

The Scapegoat

Now when the high priest has done all of that, he brings the live goat. This live goat is a really interesting part of the ceremony, he is called the scapegoat. The Hebrew word is Azazel, which means the goat of departure or the goat that escapes. Hence the scapegoat is the shortened-up form of escape goat, and it passes into our language as the one on which we place all the blame for something that has gone wrong.

Well Aaron lays both of his hands upon the head of the live goat and he confesses over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, all of their transgressions, all their sins and puts them on the head of the goat. He shall send the goat away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness and the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities into a land not inhabited and he lets the goat go in the wilderness. This goat is not killed. The first goat was the one that shed his blood. This goat, the Azazel, the scapegoat lives on in the wilderness.

Now, I don't know if the thought has crossed your mind or not, but why since an atonement has been made for sin, is there any sin left to confess? If sin has been forgiven, why is there yet another ceremony regarding sin? Think about it. You would think that whenever Christ died for your sins and you accept His sacrifice that all of your sins are forgiven, right? They're all gone. Then why is there a second part of the ceremony where your sins are confessed on the head of this other goat and he is sent away? This is an important question from a Christian perspective.

Justification, a Christian concept, is the forgiveness of sins past. But all of us know that even though we are forgiven, we still commit sin. In other words, we are forgiven but sin is still with us and sin sometimes seems to take on a life of its own. Sin begets sin and mere forgiveness does not solve all the problems. We know this is a practical matter of fact.

Now if you stood outside the Tabernacle and you saw the priest lay both of his hands on the scapegoat and heard him confess all the sins of the house of Israel on this goat, what would you have thought and felt as you watch the man carry the goat away out into the wilderness, perhaps the old Psalm, "As far as the East is from the West, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."

And so, we come to realize that at some point in time, not only do we need to be forgiven of our sins, but the effect of the sins, the continuing tenuous nature of the sin needs to be sent away from us and removed from us as well.

A Jewish Prayer

You know the Jews in the days leading up to the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, calls this period of time 'The Days of Repentance' or the 'Days of Awe'. These are days when they examine themselves and look deeply inside themselves and then they come up to the Tabernacle to present themselves before God. Now the Jews don't have a Tabernacle today, but this is the idea of it, and they are looking on this day, the Day of Atonement, for forgiveness, for reconciliation.

There is an interesting prayer from a set of prayers having to do with this day, that I found on one of the Jewish web sites and this is the prayer. "How can we complain? What can we say? How can we speak? How can we justify ourselves? We will examine our ways and scrutinize them, and we will return to You for Your hand is outstretched to accept returnees not with abundance, not with deeds do we come before you, like paupers and mendicants we knock on your door."

They came there looking for mercy. One rabbi said "Throughout the year we try to present ourselves before others and before ourselves as the proud owners of spiritual wealth as capable of accomplished individuals. Only upon the arrival of the moment of truth, does it become clear that like paupers and mendicants we knock on your door. This does not mean we are devoid of accomplishment, rather than any accomplishments we have attained cannot be attributed to us." This is a long way from salvation by works. What the Jews are looking for in atonement is the same thing every Christian is looking for: grace."

The Blood of Christ

Let's continue reading about this ceremony that the writer of Hebrews is talking about in his ninth chapter when he says in verse 13 "For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies to the purifying of the flesh: {14} How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

It is plain that the writer of Hebrews sees a strong connection between this old ceremony on the Day of Atonement and the blood of the little goat being taken into the holy of holies and the blood of Jesus Christ offered one time to God for us.

Hebrews 9:18 "Whereupon neither the first testament was dedicated without blood. {19} For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and of goats, with water, and scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book, and all the people, {20} Saying, This is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you. {21} Moreover he sprinkled with blood both the Tabernacle, and all the vessels of the ministry. {22} And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission."

This hearkens back to Jesus and the disciples on the Last Supper (Passover) when He gave them a little cup of wine and said "Here, take and drink it all. This is my blood of the New Testament (covenant) shed for you" (Matthew 26:27-28).

In Hebrews 9:24 he says "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us: {25} Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entered into the holy place every year with blood of others; {26} For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

You see it's just exactly like the high priest would go once in a year into the Tabernacle. Jesus appears once in the world to be a sacrifice for sin, {27} "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: {28} So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation."

In verse 27, the phrase "but after this the judgment" gives you pause for thought, doesn't it? But that will have to wait till some other time.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it that the majority of Christians today celebrate non-Biblical days and ignore the Biblical ones?
2. Do you think that Christians today forget to acknowledge that the start of the New Testament Church was made up of mostly Jews?
3. Is it hard for Christians to acknowledge that the Holy Days are not just for the Jews?

4. If you observe God's Holy Days, how can you reveal to others the Christian importance of them without sounding prideful or judgmental?
5. Have you ever noticed that there was "a commentary on the Tabernacle ceremony on the Day of Atonement" in the book of Hebrews?
6. Do you agree that in order to understand a lot of the New Testament, you first need to understand the Old Testament?
7. What are your thoughts to Mr. Dart's point that Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) literally means the "day of covering," and that the word translated 'mercy seat' is actually cover?
8. How important is Day of Atonement to you?
9. Why fast?
10. How important to you is the fact that we do not have to go through a human priest in order to talk to God because Christ now sits in Heavenly Holy Place?