



The Day of Atonement

The authors' thesis is that Jesus will complete or fulfill the fast known as the Day of Atonement at the time of His return, which will include the saving of all of Israel. Is this warranted on the basis of the biblical material itself?

The second of the Fall Holidays is the Day of Atonement. The literal transliteration from the Hebrew is *yom hakippurim*—day of the atonements, in the plural.

Leviticus 23:26-32

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present a food offering to the LORD. And you shall not do any work on that very day, for it is a Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God. For whoever is not afflicted on that very day shall be cut off from his people. And whoever does any work on that very day, that person I will destroy from among his people. You shall not do any work. It is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwelling places. It shall be to you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves. On the ninth day of the month beginning at evening, from evening to evening shall you keep your Sabbath.”

Notes on the passage:

- One** A dominant theme of the fast is affliction, which would include fasting from food and drink, confession of sin, and repentance.
- Two** Another theme is refraining from work; again the emphasis is on rest.
- Three** If one failed to afflict oneself and avoid work, an individual would be cut off from among the chosen people of God—a most serious and solemn warning.
- Four** To “cut off” and “destroy” are probably synonymous terms.
- Five** The nation of Israel can only *receive* atonement; it cannot achieve it or earn it. It must be made on their behalf.

Purpose of the fast

The Day of Atonement—a day of humiliation and removal of the sins of the nation so that Israel can be restored to God through the ministry of the high priest. The Day of

Atonement was observed by fasting from food and drink, avoiding daily labor, and by a holy convocation or gathering of the people for worship at the Temple. On that day and that day only, the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies wherein God dwelt.¹ So Israel was vicariously² brought into God's presence. Having been excluded from the Genesis Garden of Eden, God's chosen people are given the hope of one day being fully included in God's rest or Sabbath.

Leviticus 16

The entirety of Leviticus 16 is devoted to a detailed explanation of the sacrifices and rituals to be performed, mainly by Israel's high priest, on the Day of Atonement. There are three distinct rites required to atone for the high priest and the other priests, the sanctuary itself, and the people.

One. The high priest sacrificed a young bull to atone for his personal sin and for the sins of all the priests. The high priest bathed first and wore simple white linen clothing rather than the usual ceremonial attire. The first time the high priest entered the Holy of Holies he brought in a censer, which was a device to hold live, hot coals taken from the main altar. The smoke would fill the chamber, especially the area around the mercy seat that rested on top of the ark containing the Ten Commandments. Then, the high priest brought in the blood from the bull that had been sacrificed and sprinkled it on the mercy seat and on the floor of the Holy of holies.

Two. The second sacrificial rite performed by the high priest was to ceremonially cleanse the sanctuary from the sins of the priests and worshippers. Then the people would have free access to the sanctuary.

Days earlier, specially designated people, representing the nation, selected two goats, which were presented to the high priest. He cast lots to determine which goat would be designated "For the LORD" and which would be designated "*azazel*." (The meaning of "*azazel*" is uncertain, but it may contain the idea of being sent away, out of the camp and away from Israel.) The *azazel* would be the "scapegoat."

The goat designated "For the LORD" was sacrificed by the high priest, and then he took some of the blood and entered the Holy of Holies a third time and sprinkled blood on the mercy seat and on the floor as he had done earlier.

Three. The high priest then took the *Azazel*, placed his hands upon the head of the goat and confessed over it the sins of the people thus ceremonially transferring all national sin to the goat. The goat became the sin and guilt bearer—not his own sin and guilt, of course, but that of God's chosen people. A man

¹ Some Jewish people think that by fasting they are making atonement for their sins. In fact, only the high priest could make that atonement: the Jewish people could only receive the finished work of the high priest.

² Vicarious means through the agency of another. The people of Israel entered into God's presence by the agency of the high priest. The Israelites were considered present in the person of the high priest.

previously selected would lead the goat out into the wilderness and let it go free. The sin of the people was removed.

Later generations enlarged on the sending away of the Azazel or scapegoat. Among the additions included the goat being taken out some ten or more miles to a cliff and then pushed over to its death.

The high priest of Israel

The high priest acted alone throughout the Day of Atonement. He was not without sin and thus the first sacrificial act was intended to atone for his own sins. The high priest alone worked—no one else worked. This is an essential point embedded into the ceremonies on the Day of Atonement. All the nation received cleansing of sin through the work of one man—but for one year only.

Jesus' atoning work on the cross, this high priestly and completed work, cleanses God's chosen people forever. The writer of Hebrews, a Jew writing for Jewish people, put it this way:

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

Hebrews 7:23-27

The Day of Atonement after A.D. 70

The ceremonies of the Fast centered upon the high priest and the Holy place in the Temple in Jerusalem. In A.D. 70 that grand Temple was destroyed by a Roman army under the Roman general Titus, who would soon be emperor of Rome. The Day of Atonement is kept to this day by observant Jews in ways not found in Leviticus 16 or 23, although confession of sin, repentance, and contrition are still practiced.

The ceremonial Law could not procure forgiveness and salvation. The sacrifices had a limited effectiveness. The Temple with its altar would be lost along with the priesthood and all else that belonged to the sacrificial ministry. However, these were all meant to be temporary and designed to point to a greater reality.

The Azazel or Scapegoat

Jesus was crucified “outside the camp” on Golgotha Hill outside the walls of Jerusalem, with all the sins of God’s chosen people placed upon Him. He was sent away like the scapegoat; he died and was buried, exactly fulfilling the heart of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Then on Firstfruits He was raised from the dead. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to us to glorify this Son of God, reaped a harvest and fulfilled that fourth spring feast.

The work of the high priest, Jesus the Messiah, has made possible the fulfilling of the Day of Atonement, which is partially fulfilled already—but there is more to come. The work of redemption has already been accomplished, as the writer of Hebrews pointed out nearly two thousand years ago:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

Hebrews 9:11-12

Jesus, as high priest, did not sacrifice an animal and use that blood to cleanse the sanctuary as a way for God’s people to enter into His presence. No, the cleansing blood was His own, and upon His resurrection He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. God dwells in heaven, no longer in the Holy of Holies, and we can enter into His presence right now because of the high priestly work of Jesus. God’s people have access to His presence by prayer, and upon their death are raised to God’s presence to enjoy Him forever. Paradise, walking and talking with God, will be regained through the work of the Anointed One alone.

Zechariah foretold a great day of redemption for Israel

Zechariah the prophet declared that the LORD would give salvation to Israel. The words of prophecy are found in chapter 12 verse 10:

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

God will pour out upon Jewish people a spirit of grace, and their pleas for mercy, born of repentance, will yield to his forgiveness. Israel will once again as a people afflict themselves; they will mourn and weep bitterly as for the firstborn only child.

This dramatic and miraculous change of heart will come upon them only after they “look on me.” This is the crux of it.

Who is the “me?” The only help in identification is “on him whom they have pierced.” But notice the “me” and the “him” are one and the same. The “me” is the LORD. And He will be “pierced,” a word usually meaning thrust through, with death as the result.

How is it that the LORD could be pierced? This LORD is the LORD who, in Jesus, became flesh. This is Jesus the Messiah who was crucified, nailed to a tree, and having become a curse for His people, was punctured by a Roman spear. The eye witness to the crucifixion, John the Apostle, said: “But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). Between the nails in the hands and feet and the spear in the side, Jesus was indeed “pierced.”

How the Day of Atonement will be fulfilled

How will they look upon the one pierced? It is not evident in the text.

Jesus the Messiah is at the right hand of the Father in heaven and has been for the long interval between the Spring and the Fall Holidays. But the Messiah will return, and those who are Israel will see Him, mourn for Him, and turn to Him as Messiah and Savior. These authors think that the Day of Atonement will be fulfilled when Paul’s end of the age prophecy comes to pass:

Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

Romans 11:25-27

A “partial hardening” did come upon Israel, not a complete hardening, since we do know that many Jewish people have trusted in Jesus as Messiah and Savior down through the centuries. Indeed, two of the authors of this book are Jewish.

The partial hardening will end and yield to the salvation of all who are Israel, after those Gentiles chosen by God have also been saved. And so, the Day of Atonement will be fulfilled.

Paul quotes two passages from Isaiah, first Isaiah 59:20-21 and then Isaiah 27:9, in support of his claim that all Israel will be saved. The Deliverer will come—this is none other than the return of Jesus, the conquering Messiah, the great King, coming to establish His kingdom. Jesus, having already borne our sin, like the sin of the Israelite was placed upon the Azazel, will save all those who look upon the One

they pierced and mourn. These will recognize the pierced One as one of their own, even their firstborn as in Zechariah's prophecy. This will be a saving **look** and not a work on the part of the one who looks. It will be a resting in the completed work of the Messiah, His death, burial, and resurrection.

Thinking again about Zechariah's prophecy, chapter 12 verse 10, we find that Israel will "**look on me,**" and it is possible that the prophet had Numbers 21:4–9 in mind. The story is that a bronze snake was lifted up and those who were dying as a result of the poisonous bites of snakes were safe when they **looked**. "So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live" (Numbers 21:9).

At the return of Messiah Israel will look and be saved.

The Day of Atonement, Feast of Trumpets, and the Jubilee

Leviticus 25:8-12

You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field.

On a Day of Atonement, the tenth day of the seventh month, every fifty years, there was to be a Jubilee, transliterated *yobhel* from the Hebrew and meaning "ram," or "ram's horn." The word *shofar* appears in our passage as well, verse 9, and also was a ram's horn. After seven sabbaths of years there would be the grand sabbatical year.

On the Day of Atonement every fifty years the *shofar* was to be sounded and the year of Jubilee commenced. It meant that slaves went free, land returned to the original owners, and the fields were to lay fallow. It was a reminder that land, people, and produce of the fields belonged to God.

The Jubilee is of interest, because Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61:1–2, and this passage is filled with words and phrases very reminiscent of the Levitical Jubilee passage. At the outset of His ministry, at a synagogue in His home town of Nazareth, Jesus was given the scroll of Isaiah and read, as a part of the worship service:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the lord’s favor.”

Luke 4:18-19

This is likely Jubilee language from the prophet Isaiah, and he may be referring to Leviticus 25:8–17. But that is not all. Jesus, after finishing the passage from Isaiah said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

Jesus identified with the Isaiah passage as being the One whom the Spirit of the LORD had anointed to proclaim the good news of freedom to the slaves. And the New Testament has running through it the message of the good news that Messiah Jesus sets people free from their bondage to sin. He does so by bearing sin, then taking it away in His death and being buried. Then in His resurrection He is glorified once again, as He was before He became flesh—glorified, without sin, directly into the presence of God. He is the real and permanent Holy of Holies, having conquered sin, death, and Satan. Jesus, then, is the high priest who made an eternal atonement for the sin of the people of God.

Jesus was fulfilling not only the Day of Atonement but also the grand Sabbath of them all, the Jubilee. Jesus is the One who brings the Sabbath rest of God. The associations and meaning are obvious and utterly captivating.

Warrant for an eschatological interpretation of the Day of Atonement

Although there are no explicit messianic interpretations of the Day of Atonement in the Hebrew Bible, there is evidence that the Day of Atonement attached itself to the eschatological expectations of the Old Testament saints. Daniel’s vision of the seventy weeks of years (Dan. 9:24–27) envisions a time at which sins would be finally and fully atoned and when the Holy of Holies would be anointed. In context, this period of “seventy sevens” is not only Gabriel’s interpretation of Jeremiah’s prophecy of seventy years (9:2), but the language used here is reminiscent of the description of the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8–12). The Jubilee year was to occur every seven times seven years (forty-nine years). At that time, the ram’s horn was to be sounded in the seventh month on the Day of Atonement. At such a time (as previously stated) all debts were pardoned, and every person would return to his ancestral possession in the Promised Land. Thus, this heavenly explanation of Jeremiah’s prophecy likely incorporates a messianic interpretation of the Year of Jubilee with its associated Day of Atonement. In the fullness of time for the people of Israel (seventy times seven years), God would bring about the ultimate pardon from

all spiritual debts, a cleansing of the heavenly Holy of Holies (clearly an allusion to Leviticus 16), and the sealing up of all vision and prophecy through the coming of the Messiah.

Is there a biblical warrant?

Is it possible to state that Jesus completed, satisfied, and fulfilled, in His death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost something for which God had laid the foundation in the Jewish holidays and which mark the roadmap of world history?

In the case of the Day of Atonement we know that Jesus, through His sacrifice on the cross, atoned for all the sin of God's chosen people for all time. That had already happened on that Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Firstfruits. The question is: Will He fulfill, at His return, the Day of Atonement for Israel according to the promise of Romans 11:25-26? And again, as with the Feast of Trumpets, there is a large clue in Colossians 2:16-17:

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. **These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.**