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Atonement: The Rite of Healing.¹

There has recently been a number of books on the Christian understanding of atonement. What has been fascinating for me is the extent to which these books do, or more often do not, use the Old Testament material on atonement as the basis for what they have to say. The New Testament speaks in a variety of ways about atonement, and this has become the centre of Christian dogmatics; but this 'atonement' is only loosely related to its Old Testament roots. Did the first Christians, then radically alter what was understood by atonement, or was this radical alteration made by subsequent expositors of their ideas? The latter is more likely; in other words, the original model for New Testament theology has been lost.

George Steiner, in his book *The Death of Tragedy*, said this:

When the artist must be the architect of his own mythology, time is against him. He cannot live long enough to impose his special vision and the symbols he has devised for it on the habits of language and the feelings of his society. Without an orthodox or public frame to support it, it does not take root in the common soil.²

¹ This paper was read to the Society for Old Testament Study in Edinburgh, July 1994, and published in SJT 49.1.1996.

² G.Steiner *The Death of Tragedy* London 1961 p.322.

The death of Jesus was interpreted immediately in terms of atonement, even though the first Christians cannot have been, to use Steiner's phrase, 'architects of their own mythology'. That they had been just this, however, is the unacknowledged presupposition of much of the debate. We are given no explanation as to how the two goats of the Day of Atonement found their fulfilment in events which were interpreted as the Lord himself coming to his people as their Redeemer and the renewer of the creation.

In his book *The Christian Understanding of Atonement*, Dillistone made this observation: 'From the New Testament there come hints, suggestions, even daring affirmations of a comprehensive cosmic reconciliation.' He doubted that this was derived from Hebrew thought, but continued: It was not until early Christian witnesses found themselves confronted by pagan systems in which a full theory of cosmic redemption played a prominent part that the effect of the work of Christ upon the cosmos at large began to receive serious consideration'.³

I have reason to believe that this 'cosmic' theory of atonement does not originate in paganism but in the Jerusalem temple. Failure to understand this cult has led to some curious distortions in reading the New Testament, even by Old Testament scholars. Thus B.S.Childs in his volume on Exodus, could say of the tabernacle: '(the letter to the) Hebrews offers a major reinterpretation of the Levitical system in the Christian gospel'. But does it? Elsewhere he seems not to recognise the importance of atonement; in his

³ F.W.Dillistone *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* Welwyn 1968 p.47

new book *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, a work of over five hundred pages, only four deal with atonement in the Old Testament.⁴

I want to suggest in this paper that there was no influx of paganism into the concept of atonement as that was expressed and assumed in the New Testament, and no major reinterpretation. *What was assumed by the New testament writers was a traditional understanding of the temple rituals and myths of atonement.* When the rituals had ceased and the myths were no longer recognised for what they really were, the key to understanding the imagery of atonement was lost. It is recognised that certain concepts in the New testament such as covenant, righteousness, justification and grace must have been related to the central theme of atonement, but the overall pattern, it seems, has been lost.

Atonement translates the Hebrew *kpr*, but the meaning of *kpr* in a ritual context is not known. Investigations have uncovered only what actions were used in the rites of atonement, not what that action was believed to effect. The possibilities for its meaning are ‘cover’ or ‘smear’ or ‘wipe’⁵, but these reveal no more than the exact meaning of ‘breaking bread’ reveals about the Christian Eucharist. What these actions were believed to effect in ritual have to be deduced by other means. To understand atonement we have to understand what the faith community believed was happening when the priests smeared and sprinkled blood, and when the high priest took blood into the holy of holies

⁴ B.S.Childs *Exodus* London 1974.p.551; *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament* London SCM 1992

⁵ See J.Milgrom *Leviticus 1-17* New York 1991 pp.1079-84

on the Day of Atonement and then brought it out again to smear and sprinkle around the holy places.

First, the rite of the Day of Atonement was ancient. Under the influence of T.K.Cheyne⁶, it was fashionable for a long time to say that the Day of Atonement rituals were a late insertion into the Levitical legislation. He asserted, as one did in those days, that such a ritual showed the low spiritual state to which the Jews had sunk in the inter-testamental period! Opinion has shifted; the rite is now thought to be of ancient origin.

Furthermore, according to the Jewish Encyclopaedia, it was ‘ the keystone of the sacrificial system of post-exilic Judaism’. In other words, it could be the link between the pre- and post-exilic cults, and the extent of our ignorance about the Day of Atonement is the extent of our ignorance about Israel’s religion⁷ Much that is said or not said on this subject reveals unacknowledged presuppositions (e.g. that atonement counted for less than one percent of Israel’s theology!), but when these are challenged, interesting possibilities emerge.

What, for example, is the significance of Azazel, a name which appears in many forms?

I quote again from the Jewish Encyclopaedia: ‘Azazel enjoys the distinction of being the most mysterious extra-human character in sacred literature’.⁸ The best clue to his identity

⁶ T.K.Cheyne *Jewish Religious Life after the Exile* 1898 pp.75-76

⁷ Milgrom, op.cit.n.5 pp.3-12; c.f. W.R.Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 3rd edn. London 1927 p.216: The worship of the second temple was an antiquarian resuscitation of forms which had lost their intimate connection with the national life and therefore had lost the greater part of their original significance.’

⁸ Entries in Jewish Encyclopaedia for ‘Day of Atonement’ p 286 and Azazel p.365; c.f. 3 Enoch 4.6. The name Azazel appears in many forms but the sheer number of these

comes from the Talmud; the context is a discussion of Azazel, which by that time was generally assumed to refer to the rocky place to which the goat was sent. 'Our rabbis taught: Azazel... it should be hard and rough... Another taught: Azazel the hardest of the mountains, thus also does it say: And the mighty (*ele*) of the land he took away.' Only one of the rabbis had a different view; he said that Azazel was a fallen angel and not the name of place: 'The school of R. Ishmael taught: Azazel because it obtains atonement for the affair of Uza and Aza`el (b.Yoma 67b),

The affair of Asael and its consequences is the major theme of 1 Enoch; how these fallen angels *came to be associated* with the Day of Atonement has been variously explained. Note the assumption; they cannot have been part of the original but must have been added. Hanson and Nickelsburg aired this issue in the JBL in 1977. There are two names of the leader of the fallen angels in 1 Enoch: Asael and Semihazah, and two versions of what happened. Hanson suggested that the Asael material in 1 Enoch had been joined to the Semihazah story by stages: the judgement of Semihazah was amplified by atonement motifs from Leviticus 16 because the Azazel of Leviticus and the Asael of 1 Enoch had similar names. Nickelsburg disagreed and thought the Semihazah material had been amplified by the Prometheus myth. I shall return to his observations at a later stage.⁹

suggests that they are all versions of the same name. The name in Leviticus is 'z`zl; in b.Yoma 67b 'z`zl and 'z`l; in 4QEn^c it is 's`l; in the Greek Gizeh text it is Aseal; Syncellus has Azazel; the Ethiopic Enoch has Asael at 6.7 but Azazel in the Similitudes at 69.2; 4QEnGiants has 'z`[z]l, the same form as Leviticus, whereas 4Q 180 has 'zz`l.
⁹ P.Hanson 'Rebellion in Heaven. Azazel and Euhemeristic Heroes in 1 Enoch 6-11' and G.W.E.Nickelsburg 'Apocalyptic and Myth in 1 Enoch 6-11' both in JBL 96 (1977). The origin of both Azazel and Semihazah could be the same. Cheyne ZAW xv 1895

In the Enochic account of the fallen angels, the Great Holy One comes forth from his dwelling place to bring the Judgement (1 En.1). This is very similar to temple traditions such as Micah 1.3: The Lord is coming forth out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth'; or Deuteronomy 33.2 where the Lord 'dawns' with ten thousand of his holy ones and becomes King; or Psalm 73 where the judgement of the wicked is perceived in the sanctuary. In the Enochic tradition, the sin of the fallen angels results in the breaking of the 'cosmic' covenant and the corruption of the earth. It is perhaps significant that the rabbi who linked Azazel to the fallen angels was Ishmael, the rabbi credited with knowledge of secret temple traditions which surfaced in the Merkavah texts.¹⁰ It is not impossible that the banishing of Azazel in the atonement ritual came from the same stratum of temple tradition as did the Merkavah texts, namely that which had kept touch with the traditions from the time of the monarchy. The fallen angels would then have been associated with the Day of Atonement from the beginning. Second we must note how the rite of atonement functioned in the Pentateuch. The action of *kpr* protected against the plague of divine wrath, an outbreak of destruction, an outbreak of destruction which signalled the breakdown of the created order. Thus the Levites were installed to *kpr* in case anyone should come too near the sanctuary and thus risk plague (Num.8.19). After the revolt of Korah, those who continued to support the rebels were threatened with wrath from the Lord. A plague began but was stopped by Aaron with his incense. He stood physically between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped (Num.16.47 English numbering). The best known example is that of

suggested that Azazel was 'zz ʾl, the mighty god, and R.H.Charles, *The Book of Enoch* Oxford 1912 p.16 suggested that Semihazah was *sm* 'zz the mighty name.

¹⁰ The title of 3 Enoch is 'The Book of Enoch by Rabbi Ishmael the High Priest'

Phineas, who killed the apostate Israelite and his Midianite wife (Num.25.10-13). He made 'atonement'. As a result, he was given the covenant of priesthood, the covenant of peace. The significant point here, apart from atonement stopping the plague again, is that atonement was the ritual associated with covenant; here the covenant of peace, the covenant of the priesthood of eternity, elsewhere called the covenant of eternity or, more recently, the Cosmic Covenant¹¹. Now covenant is the first of the concepts associated with atonement in the New Testament. The covenant in question must have been this priestly covenant, the eternal covenant.

The eternal covenant was the system of bonds which established and maintained the creation, ordering and binding the forces of chaos. There are several places in the Old Testament where this older view of the creation is implied at e.g. Job 38.8-10: 'Who shut in the sea with doors and prescribed bounds for it?'; or Jeremiah 5.22: 'I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, the eternal rule which it may not transgress'; or Psalm 104.9: 'You set a boundary that (the waters) should not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth'.¹² The eternal covenant is more prominent in the non-canonical texts such as 1 Enoch, which describes how this covenant was broken and then restored. The restoration of the covenant is described in terms we recognise as the Day of the Lord, the Judgement, as we shall see later. When the statutes and laws of the eternal covenant were broken, the fabric of the creation began to collapse and chaos set in. Total disregard for the statutes resulted in the return to chaos described in e.g. Isaiah 24.5: 'The earth lies

¹¹ R.Murray *The Cosmic Covenant* London 1992. The most graphic account of atonement in the second temple period is Wisdom 18.20-25: the high priest held back the wrath and prevented it reaching the living.

polluted under its inhabitants for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.’ Or Jeremiah 4.23: ‘I looked to the earth and lo it was waste and void; and to the heavens and they had no light’. Jeremiah sees the world returned to its pre-creation state. When the covenant was restored, the creation was renewed and returned to its original condition of salom and sedaqah/dikkaiousune¹³, the second of the concepts associated with atonement in the New Testament.

I should like to quote here from an article by Mary Douglas published earlier this year in *Jewish Studies Quarterly*:

Terms derived from cleansing, washing and purging have imported into biblical scholarship distractions which have occluded Leviticus’ own very specific and clear description of atonement. According to the illustrative cases from Leviticus, to atone means to cover or recover, cover again, to repair a hole, cure a sickness, mend a rift, make good a torn or broken covering. As a noun, what is translated atonement, expiation or purgation means integument made good; conversely, the examples in the book indicate that defilement means integument torn. Atonement does not mean covering a sin so as to hide it from the sight of God; it means making good an outer layer which has rotted or been pierced.¹⁴

This sounds very like the cosmic covenant with its system of bonds maintaining the created order, broken by sin and repaired by ‘atonement’.

¹² Also Jer.3.20ff.

¹³ Ps.72; Isa.11.1-9; 32.1-20.

¹⁴ M.Douglas ‘Atonement in Leviticus’ JSQ 1(1993-94) p.117

Third, we must consider the temple, the place where atonement was effected. The temple was the meeting place of heaven and earth, time and eternity. The holy of holies, the place of the throne of the Lord, was simultaneously heaven and earth. The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven' (Ps.11.4) wrote the psalmist, and we must believe what he said. 'A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary' are the words of Jeremiah (Jer.17.12). The traditions say that it was an exact replica of the service of heaven. Moses had been given the plan of the tabernacle, not just its construction, but the details for the vestments, the incense, the oils, the priesthood and the sacrifices (Exod.25-30). Or David had given Solomon a comprehensive plan of the temple which he had received from the Lord (1 Chron.28.11-19 c.f. 11QT) the furnishings of the temple were those of heaven; Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord (1Chron.29.23). That is what the Chronicler wrote and presumably that is what he and the Jerusalem temple personnel of his time believed. Such a belief can be deduced from the Qumran texts such as the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* or the *Blessings*: ' May you be as an angel of the presence in the abode of holiness to the glory of the God of [hosts]' (1QSb 4).

The implication of this belief must be that what was performed in the temple 'was' the service of heaven and so the rite of atonement must have had a heavenly counterpart, for want of better words. The association of atonement and covenant of creation in the texts cited above suggests that atonement rituals were creation and covenant rituals.

Further, the role of the priests is significant. According to the Qumran texts they were angels, and there is enough evidence elsewhere to suggest that the high priest was the Lord. The tradition recorded in Deuteronomy 32.8 (using the Qumran and LXX reading rather than the MT) is that the lord was the first among the sons of El Elyon, in other words, the chief of the angels¹⁵. His counterpart, the high priest, would have been the first among the priests. Further, the high priest wore the sacred name YHWH on his forehead when he was officiating in the temple. This is obscured in the canonical texts, but is quite clear in Philo who says the high priest wore a golden plate showing a name that only the purified may speak, and ‘that Name has four letters’; and in the *Letter of Aristeas* which reads ‘On the front of the hallowed diadem... in holy letters on a leaf of gold (the high priest) wears the Name of God’¹⁶.

That creation rituals should be performed by the Lord is hardly surprising. If the Lord had bound the creation at the beginning with the great covenant which kept the forces of chaos in their place and gave security to his people, any covenant renewal ceremony must have involved the Lord performing these acts. Atonement rituals repaired the damage to the created order caused by sin through which ‘wrath’ could have broken in with such disastrous consequences. Again the Jewish Encyclopaedia makes an interesting

¹⁵ See P.S.Skehan ‘A Fragment of the Song of Moses (Deut.32) from Qumran’ BASOR 136 (1954).

¹⁶ Philo *Moses* II.114; *Abraham* 103; *Aristeas* 93. A literal reading of the third commandment (Exod.20.7; Deut 5.11) suggests that it applied originally to the high priest: ‘You shall not bear the Name of the LORD your God for evil purposes...’ The description of the high priest Simon coming out of ‘the house of the veil’ is a theophany (Eccles.50.5-21).

observation: ‘But while, according to Scripture, the high priest made atonement, *tradition transferred the atoning power to God*’¹⁷.

Fourth, we must consider the remainder of the temple. The *d^ebir*, the holy of holies, was the place of the Lord’s throne, but the *hekal*, the great hall of the temple, was the Garden of Eden. The decorations of the temple were those of Eden (trees, pomegranates, lilies, cherubim), the seven branched lamp was described in later tradition as the tree of life, a bronze serpent was removed from the temple by Hezekiah, and Ezekiel saw the river of life flowing from the temple¹⁸. Just as the *d^ebir* represented heaven (represented is a concession to our way of thinking), so the *hekal* represented the completed creation. This again suggests that the rituals of the temple were creation rituals.

Fifth, we note that in temple atonement symbolism, blood was life. Texts which deal with cultic matters are notoriously difficult to translate; the RSV gives Leviticus 17.11 as: ‘For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life’. The life of the flesh is in the blood, and that blood on the altar serves to *kpr* ‘*al* the lives of the people.

We come now to the sixth and last preliminary observation. When the action *kpr* was performed, the object was a place or a thing not a person. Often there was an impersonal

¹⁷ My emphases

¹⁸ 1Kgs 6.14-36; Exod.25.31-37; Philo *Questions on Genesis* 1.10; 2Kgs 18.4; Ezek.47.1-12. Also my book *The Gate of Heaven* London SPCK 1991 pp. 90-95

form: 'It shall be *kpr* for you'. On the Day of Atonement according to Leviticus 16, the high priest sprinkled the blood on the *kapporet* ('the mercy seat') and in front of it, to *kpr* 'al the holy of holies, then he performed a similar ritual for the tent of meeting and then again for the altar. In the Mishnah these actions are prescribed for the holy of holies, the curtain, the incense altar in the temple, and the altar of sacrifice outside. Places were sprinkled to cleanse, consecrate and *kpr* them from all the uncleannesses of the people (m.Yoma 5.4-5). The Jewish Encyclopaedia again: 'In the prophetic language, however, the original idea of the atonement offering had become lost, and instead of the offended person (God) *the offence or guilt became the object of atonement*¹⁹. The assumption here is that the prophets altered the original meaning of atonement. Milgrom says something similar²⁰:

'Outside the cult *kipper* undergoes a vast change which is immediately apparent from its new grammar and syntax. Whereas in rituals the subject of *kipper* is usually a priest and the direct object is a contaminated thing, in non-ritual literature, the subject is usually the deity and the direct object is sin (Isa. 6.7; Jer.18.23; Ezek.16.63; Pss 65.4; 78.38; 79.9)'. Actually this represents no rupture. This is very important; the ritual texts describe the actions done by the priests, whilst the non-ritual texts give the meaning of those actions. A priest smearing blood in the temple 'was' God removing sin.²¹

¹⁹ My emphases

²⁰ Milgrom op.cit n.5 p.1083

²¹ C.f. W.R.Smith *The Old Testament and the Jewish Church* London and Edinburgh 1892 p.381 'The most important point (about *kpr*) is that except in the Priests' Code, it is God not the priest who (atones)... '

These six are the bases for any investigation of atonement: first, that it could be illuminated by the Enoch texts; second, that atonement was associated with the eternal covenant; third, that the temple service was the service of heaven; fourth, that the temple represented the entire system of heaven and earth; fifth that blood was life; and sixth, that it was places with the temple complex that were 'repaired' to remove the effects of sin.

The result of *kpr* was that the 'iniquity' was *** and here there is another problem with the meaning of the Hebrew word. The literal meaning of *nasa* is 'bear' or 'carry' but in certain contexts it seems more appropriate to translate it by 'forgive'. There are cases when a person is said to 'bear' his own guilt when he has deliberately broken a law (e.g. Lev. 19.8). The priests are said to 'bear' the guilt of the sinner after they have performed the atonement ritual for inadvertent offences (e.g. Lev. 10.17), and yet the Lord, with the same verb, is said to 'forgive'. 'Who', asked Micah, 'is a God like you bearing i.e. forgiving sin?' (Mic. 7.18) Job asked (again, reading literally): Why do you not bear my transgression and cause my guilt to pass away? (Job 7.21) There are many examples. What emerges is that 'carrying' iniquity was the role of the priests, of the Lord and of the scapegoat. If the temple rituals were the rituals of heaven and the Lord was part of the rituals, it is unlikely that a distinction would have been made between the role of the lord 'forgiving' and the high priest 'bearing' the iniquities. We then have to ask what aspect of the ritual could have depicted this 'bearing' of sins, and the obvious answer is the scapegoat.

The priests were enabled to ‘bear’ the guilt in two ways: ordinary priests ate the flesh of the sin offering whose blood had been used for *kpr*. They were then said to ‘bear’ the iniquity (Lev.10.17). The implication is that by eating the flesh of the victim the priests absorbed the impurity and made it possible for the offender to be reintegrated into the community. If the offerings were not eaten by the priests, then the people continued to bear their own guilt (Lev.22.15, but this text is obscure). The high priest himself ‘bears’ the iniquity of gifts consecrated to the Lord and thus they become acceptable (Exod.28.38), but to do so, the high priest has to wear the on his forehead the sacred Name. This seems to suggest that when the high priest functioned as the Lord, he absorbed the impurities of others. This understanding of atonement is well illustrated by Ps.32.1, which, whilst not using *kpr*, says exactly what was done in that ritual. Again, rendering literally: ‘Blessed is the man borne in respect of his transgressions and covered in respect of his sin’. This is quoted in Romans 4.7-8. Is it possible, then, that underlying the metaphorical use of *nasa`* there lies the memory of an older ritual when the Lord (or his representative, the high priest) literally bore away the guilt, sin, and transgression of his people which would otherwise have laid them open to the dangers of sickness, enemies, plague and other consequences of the broken covenant?²²

I return now to Mary Douglas’ article: she notes that what is unusual about biblical purity laws is that they do not serve to set members of the congregation apart from one another.

²² F.Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A.Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon* Oxford (1907) 1962 p.671 says that *nasa`* is used to mean ‘forgive’ in older texts and not in Deuteronomic texts.

Contra .Smith op.cit n.7, p.349: ‘.. the flesh is given to the priests because they minister as representatives of the sinful people...’

The rituals are for keeping the community together. ‘The more closely we look at the biblical rules of sacred contagion, the more strongly marked appears the difference between the Bible system and other systems of contagious impurity. We cannot avoid asking why the priests defined laws of purity that did not make parts of the congregation separate from or defined as higher or lower than the rest’²³ This implies that the role of the priest/the Lord was to hold his people together; this would have been done by the priest absorbing the effects of sin and repairing the covenant bonds.

The blood ritual was performed in the temple. For some offences the ritual was performed by the priests in the outer part of the temple, but for the transgressions, (*p^esa`im*, literally rebellions) the high priest took the blood into the holy of holies and then brought it out again. Jacob Milgrom has compared the long distance effect of sin upon the temple to the portrait of Dorian Grey²⁴; sins committed elsewhere had the effect of polluting the temple. Whilst I think that Milgrom is broadly correct in this comparison, there is room for refinement. If the temple represented, ‘was’ the creation, then when any offence was committed, the cosmic covenant was breached and the people were exposed to danger. It was not simply the case that the temple was polluted by sinners, as they themselves would not have been allowed into those parts of the temple complex which their sins had damaged. It was the land or the creation which had been polluted and the temple ‘was’ the creation. Thus Isaiah 24.5: ‘The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.’ The damage was restored by ritual in the temple. ‘Life’ i.e. blood

²³ Douglas op.cit. n.14.p.114

was applied to the damaged parts and the impurity was absorbed, ‘borne’ by the priest who performed the *kpr* . It was the ritual of restoration and healing.

For the great atonement a greater ritual was demanded. The high priest took blood into the holy of holies and when he emerged, he smeared and sprinkled it on various parts of the temple. Then he placed both his hands on the scapegoat, loaded the animal with the sins of the people, and sent it into the desert. Translated into temple terms this means: The Lord emerged from heaven carrying life which was given to all parts of the created order as the effects of sin were absorbed and wounds healed. The Lord then transferred the sins of the people, which he had been carrying, onto the goat, which was then driven away carrying the sins. The question which must be asked is: ‘Whose life did the |Lord use to restore the creation?’ or ‘Whose life did the blood represent?’

Before that question can be answered, we need to look for the ‘myth’ which corresponded to the high priest coming out of the holy of holies carrying blood. I suggest that the Day of the Lord texts belong with the Day of Atonement ritual. They describe how the Lord came forth from his dwelling i.e. from the holy of holies. The Qumran Hebrew of Deuteronomy 32.43 is very similar to the LXX (but different from the MT) and reads:

Heavens praise his people, all *`elohim* bow down to him

For he avenges the blood of his sons and takes vengeance on his adversaries

And requites those who hate him and *kpr* the land of his people.

²⁴ Milgrom op.cit.n.5 pp. 260-261

The one who performs the *kpr* of the land here in this text is the Lord.

Further, the *Assumption of Moses*²⁵, which is widely held to be an expansion of this part of Deuteronomy, has significant additional detail where it corresponds to Deuteronomy 32.43.

Then his kingdom will appear throughout his whole creation

Then the evil one will have an end.

Sorrow will be led away with him²⁶

Then will be filled the hands²⁷ of the angel who is in the highest place appointed

He will at once avenge them of their enemies.

The heavenly one will go forth from his kingly throne

He will go forth from his holy habitation with indignation and wrath on behalf of his sons (Ass.Mos 10)

The Assumption, dated towards the end of the second temple period, shows how this texts was then understood; the figure emerging from his holy habitation was an angel priest, coming to bring judgement and establish his kingdom. The evil one was led away.

The Qumran Melchizedek text (11 QMelch) provides a third piece of evidence. It describes the day of Judgement which is also the Day of Atonement at the end of the tenth Jubilee. A heavenly deliverer, Melchizedek, the great high priest and leader of the sons of heaven, comes to deliver the sons of light from the hand of Satan. The

²⁵ Also known as the *Testament of Moses*.

²⁶ Note the terminology.

²⁷ 'Filling the hands' i.e. with incense, means ordination.

accompanying texts are Psalm 82.1, where the *'elohim* are judged, Isaiah 52.7, where the messenger brings peace and proclaims the reign of God in Zion, Daniel 9.25, where the anointed prince comes to Jerusalem, and Isaiah 61.2-3, the day of the Lord's favour and vengeance. The text describes judgement on the fallen angels as the people are rescued from Satan, peace for Jerusalem, the advent of the Messiah and the Day of the Lord. These three extracts, from Deuteronomy, the *Assumption of Moses* and the *Melchizedek Text* are mutually consistent, and show that the heavenly high priest was the Lord who came from his holy place on the Day of Atonement in order to save his people from the power of the fallen angels, to punish their enemies and to *kpr* the land. I suggest, in the light of this, that *kpr* has to mean restore, recreate or heal.

The most detailed description of the Day of the Lord (and indeed of the cosmic covenant), is found in *I Enoch* (the Ethiopic Enoch). The text begins with the Great Holy One coming from his dwelling place to bring judgement on the fallen angels. You will recall the minority opinion of R.Ishmael, that the Day of Atonement was necessitated by the fallen angels and their deeds. In *I Enoch* their leader Asael is bound by the archangel Raphael (the healer!) and then imprisoned in the desert in a place called Dudael. The purpose of this judgement, we are told, is to give life to the earth. 'And he will proclaim life for the earth, that he is giving life to her' (1 En.10.7)²⁸. This was the blood ritual, the life giving ritual.

²⁸ There are various readings here. The Ethiopic texts have either 'heal the earth' or 'That I may heal the earth'. The Akhmim Greek has 'the earth' *ge*, and Syncellus has 'the plague' *plege*. Either way, the meaning is clear enough.

We now have to attend to some details in the ritual in the light of the underlying myth. First, there were two goats and, according to the *Mishnah*, they had to be identical (m.Yoma 6.1). Between them, they carried the ritual. This is important; the two goats were two aspects of one ritual and cannot be separated. This was known to the first Christians who had no difficulty in comparing Jesus to both goats; he was both the sacrifice and the scapegoat.²⁹

The two goats were distinguished by lot: one was ‘for Azazel’ and the other was ‘for the Lord’. That is how we usually translate. The scapegoat was driven into the desert to a place whose name appears in a variety of forms³⁰. Origen (Celsus 6.43), writing early in the third century CE, implies that the goat sent out into the desert was not ‘for Azazel’ but was called Azazel. This is quite clear in both the Greek and Latin texts; the evil one was identified with the snake in Eden and with the goat named Azazel sent out into the desert. Such an identification would be quite in accord with the system of counterparts which characterised temple ritual. The animal chosen was also appropriate; in Hebrew, the words ‘goat’ and ‘demon’ look identical (*sa`yr*)³¹. The high priest would have put the sins of Israel on to Azazel before he was taken to the desert. If the one goat chosen ‘was’ Azazel, then the other must have been the Lord. The construction in the Hebrew is identical, and the sequence in the ritual confirms this. The goat offered as the sin offering

²⁹ The themes of e.g. Heb.89.11-12 or 13.11-12 is that Jesus was the Day of Atonement sacrifice, whereas Heb.13.13 implies that he was the scapegoat. The Epistle of Barnabas chapters 5 and 7 compares Jesus to the scapegoat.

³⁰ Targum Ps.Jon. Lev.16 has Beth Chadure; m.Yoma 6.8 has Beth Haroro (variants Hiddudo, Horon). The Enochic Dudael probably arose from a confusion of the Hebrew letters *r* and *d* (resh and dalet) which can look alike.

does not in fact take away the sin. Instead this is somehow collected by the high priest, presumably as he performs the atonement rite, ‘carried’ and then transferred from the high priest on to the head of the Azazel goat (Lev.16.21)³².

Nickelsburg drew very different conclusions. In summing up his disagreement with Hanson, he discussed first the names of the desert place to which the goat was sent, and then offered this decisive conclusion as to why Enoch cannot have been related to Leviticus 16:

‘In Enoch all sin is written over Asael the demon. In the Targum (and the Bible) all of the people’s sins are placed on the head of the goat (Lev.16.21)... In Enoch the demon is destroyed. In the Targum it is the goat that perishes (Lev.16.22)... On the basis of this comparison we must ask whether 1 Enoch has been amplified by a Leviticus tradition which is represented by Targum Pseudo Jonathan. Indeed we shall ask, does 1 Enoch reflect Leviticus 16 at all?’

The evidence which Nickelsburg use as ‘proof’ that 1 Enoch and Leviticus 16 were unrelated is in fact the most crucial evidence for understanding the ritual of atonement, namely that the goat ‘was’ the demon. Nickelsburg continued his disagreement thus:

³¹ There is similar word play underlying the New Testament, since the Aramaic *talya* young one, can be used for a servant or a lamb.

³² L.L.Grabbe ‘The Scapegoat Tradition. A Study in Early Jewish Interpretation’ JSJ xviii (1987) concluded thus: ‘the scapegoat was symbolic of this archdemon (i.e.Azazel) who would eventually be bound and punished and thus prevented from subverting God’s people.’ In other words, the ritual did not send a goat out *to* Azazel, but *as* Azazel. Because he only dealt only with the scapegoat part of the ritual, and therefore with only a part of the evidence, he did not draw the obvious conclusion as to what the other goat must have represented.

‘If (Hanson’s proposed) reviser (of the Semihazah and Asael traditions to form 1 Enoch) has used the Day of Atonement motif, he has made some radical revisions in his biblical tradition. 1. In the biblical text and the Targum, a ritual is prescribed which involves the sending out of a goat into the wilderness ‘to Azazel’ (a demon? That is already out there) in consequence of which atonement is effected. In 1 Enoch, Asael, clearly a demon, is himself led out into the wilderness and buried there, in consequence of which the earth is healed. 2. Not only is Asael identified (in Hanson’s thesis) with the Azazel in the wilderness, he is also identified with the goat which is led out to Azazel. He has all sin written ver him and he is destroyed like th goat in the Targum...’

Such an identification of goat and demon was clearly impossible, and so he continued:

‘Although (Hanson’s proposed) reviser is dependent on Leviticus 16, he has used none of the specific atonement language of that chapter. Instead Raphael’s action is derived from his name; he heals the earth...

In summary, if the reviser is dependent on Leviticus 16, he has changed the nature of the biblical tradition, he has confused the cast of characters, and he has failed to introduce the central concept of Leviticus 16, viz. atonement... In view of these difficulties, a primary dependence on the Prometheus myth appears more tenable’.³³

Can we be so certain that an ancient author changed the nature of the tradition, confused the cast of characters and failed to understand the atonement when the tradition, the characters and the nature of atonement are the very things we are trying to discover?

³³ Nickelsburg op.cit.n.9.p.402.

When lesser offences were *kpr*, the priest ‘carried’ the sin by virtue of eating the flesh of the animal whose life had effected the *kpr*. He identified with it. For the great *kpr*, the blood/life of the goat ‘as the Lord’ was a substitute for the blood/life of the high priest (also the Lord) who thus carried the sin of the people himself as he performed the act of *kpr* throughout the temple/creation. Thus, having collected the sins, he it was who was able to transfer them onto the goat who ‘carried’ them (*ns*, Lev.16.22) and took them to the desert³⁴. The role of the high priest, the Lord, was to remove the damaging effect of sin from the community and the creation, and thus to restore the bonds which held together the community and the creation. This is consistent with Mary Douglas’s observation about the peculiarity of biblical purity laws; many of the rituals were for reintegration not expulsion.

I must now offer some corroborating evidence. First, from 1 Enoch again, chapter 47 which is part of the first Similitude. Each of the three *Similitudes* is a vision of the heavenly throne and the judgement, and it is easy enough to establish the identity of the central Man figure. He is called Son of Man (whatever that means), the Anointed One, and the Chosen One, and the simple process of matching phrases and descriptions shows that he was identical to Isaiah’s enigmatic Servant. The scene in chapter 47 is this: the Man figure has ascended to the throne, as in Daniel 7; then we learn that the blood of the

³⁴ Azazel himself as the bearer of sins appears in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* 13.14, addressed to Azazel; ‘...the garment in heaven which was formerly yours has been set aside for him (Abraham) and the corruption which was on him has gone over to you’. In 4QEN Giants we find: ‘Then he punished not us but Aza`zel...’ J.T.Milik *The Books of Enoch. Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4* Oxford 1976 p.313.comments: Azazel appears here in his expiatory role (Lev.16.8,10,26) for he seems to be punished for the

Righteous One has been brought up to the Lord of Spirits, together with the prayers of the righteous ones. Then the judgement begins. The Righteous One elsewhere in the *Similitudes* (1 En.38.2; 53.6) is the Anointed One. M Black suggested that the Righteous One whose blood was brought before the Lord could be a reference to Isaiah 53, where the Servant, who makes righteous, pours out his life as an *'asam*.³⁵

Second, we see that Isaiah 53 could have been inspired by the Day of Atonement ritual.

A few points must suffice.

1. 'He shall startle many nations' (Isai.52.15); *yazzeḥ*, the apparently untranslatable verb means 'sprinkle' in the atonement ritual (Lev.16.19). The Servant figure does not 'startle' many peoples; the original Hebrew says he 'sprinkles'³⁶.
2. The Servant 'carries' the people's sicknesses or weaknesses (Isa.53.4).
3. The Servant has been wounded for their transgressions. Wounded, *hll*, is a word which carries both the meanings required by Mary Douglas's theory of atonement, viz. to pierce or to defile.
4. 'Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole' (Isa.53.5b) can also be translated 'The covenant bond of our peace was his responsibility'³⁷. 'With his

sins of the giants.' He does not comment on the fact that here again it is Azazel and not a goat for Azazel which is the expiation.

³⁵ M.Black *The Book of Enoch or 1 Enoch* Leiden 1985 p.209.

³⁶ 'Sprinkles' *rhantisei* is kept in Aquila and Theodotion. There is the problem of the object of the verb, since elsewhere the object of this verb is the blood, or whatever is sprinkled, and not what it is sprinkled upon, but this difficulty, not felt by the ancient translators, must be balanced against a major emendation.

³⁷, 'Chastisement' *mwsr* c.f.Ezek.20.37, *msrt hbryt*, where this word means 'bond of' the covenant; and Ps.2.3, the 'bonds' of the LORD's Anointed, in a cosmic covenant context. Similarly Jer.2.20; 5.5.

stripes, *hbrt*,³⁸ 'we are healed' would then become 'By his joining us together we are healed', forming a parallel to *mwsr*, covenant bond. The primary meaning of *hbr* is to unite, join together.

5. The Servant pours out his soul/life as a sin offering, *`sm* (Isa.53.19). the *`sm* is, according to Milgrom, the sacrifice which redresses the *m`l*, which is either sacrilege against holy things or violation of the covenant.³⁹ The soul/life was in the blood of the sacrifice, hence it was poured out.

All this suggests that the Servant figure was modelled on the one who performed the atonement rites in the first temple. This figure appears in Enoch's Similitudes in his heavenly aspect as the Man, the Anointed, the Chosen One. In the ritual of the second temple, the figure became two goats: one bearing the sins away and the life/blood of the other being taken into the holy of holies where the ark, the throne had been⁴⁰.

Third, there is additional information about the scapegoat in the *Mishnah*; people pulled out the goat's hair as it was led away (m.Yoma 6.4). In the *Epistle of Barnabas*⁴¹ there is a quotation from an unknown source about the scapegoat: 'Spit on it, all of you, thrust your goads into it, wreath its head with scarlet wool and let it be driven into the desert' (Barn.7). The goat suffered the fate of the Servant: 'I gave my back to the smiters and

³⁸ Identical consonants in Exod.26.4,10 mean 'something to join together the curtains of the tabernacle'.

³⁹ Milgrom op.cit. n.5 p.347.

⁴⁰ Two goats, because the 'resurrection' of the king/high priest could take place in the holy of holies, but the resuscitation of a dead goat could not.

⁴¹ According to Acts 4.36 Barnabas was a Levite and would have known the temple practice of his time.

my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard. I hid not my face from shame and spitting (Isa.50.6); and ‘He was pierced for our transgressions’ (Isa.53.5). Barnabas continues: ‘When they see him (Jesus) coming on the Day, they are going to be struck with terror at the manifest parallel between him and the goat.’ The reference is to the future coming of the Lord to his people. This is another Servant motif; the recognition of who the Servant is⁴². Barnabas, too, associates the scapegoat with the Day of the Lord: ‘They shall see him on that Day, clad to the ankles in his red woollen robe, and will say, ‘Is this not he whom we once crucified and mocked and pierced and spat upon?’ (Barn.7).

To conclude. I must return to the question with which I began: what was the understanding of atonement which gave rise to the Christian claims about cosmic reconciliation, which Dillistone thought must have derived from pagan systems? What I have proposed would explain why the Lord himself was the atonement sacrifice⁴³. The whole point of the argument in the Epistle to the Hebrews is that it was Jesus the high priest who took his own blood into the heavenly sanctuary and thereby became the mediator of a new covenant (Heb.9.11-15). What I propose would explain the cosmic unity described in Ephesians 1.10: ‘to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth...’ and in Colossians 1.17,20: ‘In him all things hold together,... through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven...’ It would explain Matthew’s use of the Servant text ‘he took our infirmities and bore our diseases’ in the

⁴² The recognition motif is common throughout this material: Isa.52.13-15; 1 En.62.1; 108.14-15; 2 Esdr.7.37; Wisd.5.1ff is an adaptation of the theme; 2 Bar.51.4-6.

⁴³ This builds upon the theory set out in my book *The Great Angel. A Study of Israel’s Second God* London SPCK 1992. Jesus was believed to be the manifestation/incarnation of Yahweh.

context of healing miracles (Mat.8.17). It would explain why a sermon in Acts refers to Jesus as the Righteous One and the Servant but also as the Author of Life (Acts 3.13-15). It would explain all the new life and new creation imagery in the New Testament. Above all it would explain the so-called kenotic hymn in Philippians2.6-11; the self-emptying of the Servant would have been the symbolic life giving when the blood, the life, was poured out by the high priest on the Day of Atonement to heal and restore the creation.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See W.Zimmerli and J.Jeremias *The Servant of God* ET London 1957 p.97n