

What was the scapegoat?

Each year on the Day of Atonement, two male goats were selected for a sin offering (16:5), but only one of them was actually killed. The second, living goat — which is traditionally called the scapegoat — was taken to an uninhabited wilderness and released after the sins of the people had been confessed over it by the high priest (16:10, 20-22). This represented forgiveness and the removal of sin through the shedding of blood associated with the first goat. Of course, only the sacrifice of Christ actually took away sin; bulls and goats did not. (See Hebrews chapter ten.)

Are there any parallel passages?

The closest parallel to the two goats on the Day of Atonement is the use of two birds in 14:1-7 when someone was cured of leprosy. The first bird was killed, and the second one was set free. There is an important difference in these cases, however. Birds often return, but the second goat was taken to a place from which it could not return. Moreover, the former leper was allowed to return home like the second bird, but the scapegoat which represented sin that had been forgiven was permanently removed.

What do theologians say?

Understandably, the sprinkling of the blood upon the mercy seat (16:11-16) is stressed because it represented the death of Christ. However, the follow-up role of the second goat is usually neglected even though the second goat pointed to the taking away of the sin of the world (John 1:29). Again uninspiringly, theologians devote many pages to the debate about the meaning or extent of “world” in John 1:29 but have precious little or even nothing to say about the fact of the taking away of sin in Christ is complete. The scapegoat did not come back, and in Christ our sins are remembered no more (Heb. 8:12, 10:17).

What do others say?

Sadly, there is much careless speculation about the second goat. Some say that it was taken to a cliff to be killed in a place called Azazel. Others claim that it was presented to a wilderness demon named Azazel. These strange theories arise from the fact that the Hebrew term, *azazel*, traditionally translated in English as scapegoat, is not found elsewhere in the Bible. It is a difficult term, but a parallel one in Arabic means to completely remove, and this meaning fits the context well. Turning the term into the name of a place or a demon does not.

Why were goats used instead of sheep?

Young sheep or goats were both acceptable for Jewish offerings, but for some reason two kids (young goats) was required on the Day of Atonement rather than lambs. Perhaps this was because a young goat would have been more likely to readily leave the person taking it into the wilderness. Secondly, the abandoned goat would have had a better chance of surviving in the wild than a lamb would have had.

What is the application?

Of course, we should take sin seriously, just as was done on the Day of Atonement. However, for those of us who have been forgiven through the Messiah, it is now possible for us to draw near to God the Father with more boldness than during the old dispensation. (See Hebrews 10:22.) The blood of bulls and goats could not take away our sins (Heb. 10:4), but they pointed to the One who did (Heb. 10:5-10). Knowing Him, we should approach God boldly.