WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS
A survey of Leviticus and Numbers

After detailing the offerings that maintained the holiness of God’s tabernacle (Leviticus 1-7), the book of Leviticus discussed the priests’ important intermediary role through its description of the ordination of the priesthood, its initial service, and its failure (Leviticus 8-10). The priesthood’s struggle with purity (Leviticus 10:1-3) revealed both the priests and the peoples’ need to better understand the difference “between the holy and the common...between the unclean and the clean” (Leviticus 10:10-11) and to a series of purity laws designed to help the people understand that difference (Leviticus 12-15). Purity’s important place prepares readers for God’s instructions about the Day of Atonement, a centrally important day of worship to restore the people’s relationship with God by restoring the purity of the tabernacle.

Leviticus 16-17 – the Day of Atonement
Because the tabernacle hosted the daily sacrifices offered by the people, the tabernacle itself became ‘tainted’ by the people’s impurities and needed to be cleansed. God consequently established a special, once-a-year ceremony – the Day of Atonement – “to make atonement for the Holy Place because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all of their sins” (Leviticus 16:16, 33-34). Failure to cleanse the tabernacle carried a real risk to Israel, one already hinted at in Exodus 33:1-3.

God emphasized the importance of the Day of Atonement in a few ways:
• First, He placed the day’s instructions in the center of the book of Leviticus and in the center of the Torah, giving it a place symbolizing its importance.
• Second, God detailed elaborate instructions for the day to be observed by the entire nation.
  o God ordered the day, celebrated on the tenth day of the seventh month, to be “a Sabbath of solemn rest” for the whole nation (Leviticus 16:29-31); as with the Sabbath day, the complete ban on work signaled the Day of Atonement’s importance.
  o God announced that He would “appear in the cloud over the mercy seat” on that day, requiring special actions from the high priest who would enter into His presence as a representative of the people (Leviticus 16:1-4). The high priests’ actions included:
    ▪ Washing and dressing in the simple, unadorned garments of a priest rather than the normal, elaborate garments of the high priest (Leviticus 16:4; cf. Exodus 39).

1 All quotes from the Bible come from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.
Joshua Hartwigsen, Adult Class (Wednesday, Auditorium), Winter Quarter, 2019

Handout #5

- Presenting a sin offering and burnt offering for himself (Leviticus 16:3, 11-14) and for the nation (Leviticus 16:5, 15) so that he could “make atonement” for the tabernacle and its altar (Leviticus 16:16-19).
- Symbolically banishing the peoples’ sins into the wilderness outside of Israel’s camp through the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:20-22), one of the two goats selected to represent Israel (Leviticus 16:5-10).
  - Unlike the goat used in the sin offering, the high priest “put” Israel’s sins “on the head of the second goat and sent it away into the wilderness” (Leviticus 16:21-22); it carried Israel’s iniquities away from God’s presence in their camp and into the wilderness.
  - While “wilderness” has many associations in the Bible, it does, in the case of the Day of Atonement, represent a place of evil, of chaos and death in contrast to the Israelite camp with its God-inhabited symbol of Eden at its center.
  - The negative imagery of the wilderness on the Day of Atonement offers some insights into “Azazel” (Leviticus 16:10, 26), which might be connected to the “goat demons” in Leviticus 17:7 (“goat demon” translates the word šā·ʿîr, a word meaning ‘hairy goat’ but rendered as “goat demon” because the people offered “sacrifices” to it).
  - The imagery associated with the scapegoat thus seem intended to help the Israelites understand the Day of Atonement as God’s gracious willingness to ensure His ongoing relationship with the nation by renewing their purity perpetually threatened, not only by their own failures, but also by the evils surrounding them.

**The Day of Atonement**

**Instructions for Priests**

1. Sacrifice these two animals to atone for the sins of the high priest and his family:

2. Get two goats. Choose one to be a scapegoat to bear the sins of the community. The other goat will be sacrificed.

3. Sacrifice these two animals to atone for the sins of the community:

4. Burn incense in the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood of the previous animal sacrifices onto the Ark of the Covenant.

5. The high priest is to verbally transfer the sins of the community onto the scapegoat.

6. A man will then lead the scapegoat far into the desert and abandon it to die.
• The importance of the Day of Atonement transitions to instructions about sacrifices to God in Leviticus 17.
  o Israelites could only sacrifice to God in front of the tabernacle (Leviticus 17:2-5), a command intended to stop the Israelites from offering “their sacrifices to goat demons” (Leviticus 17:7; cf. 2 Chronicles 11:14-15). God commanded Israel to present their offerings at the place He dwelt rather than attempting to coopt the ‘high places’ commonly used by the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 12:1-28).
  o Additionally, God reminded Israel that they did not have a right to any animal’s blood; “the life of the flesh is in the blood” and He alone has the right to life (Leviticus 17:10-16). While it might seem arbitrarily included in the material about the Day of Atonement, we must remember that the sacrifices Israel offered to maintain its purity (Leviticus 12-16) involved blood; the blood connected to many of Israel’s sacrifices thus reminded them of the penalties associated with their impurities and of God’s graciousness willingness to accept a substitute in their place.

APPLICATIONS
The author of Hebrews drew parallels between Jesus’ crucifixion and the Day of Atonement (Hebrews 13:11-12); in what ways do you think the Day of Atonement might offer insights into Jesus?

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Even though Jesus’ covenant does not require a Day of Atonement as did the Mosaic covenant, the message of that day remains essential. What do you think God wanted the Day of Atonement to communicate to the Israelites and how do you think He communicates that same message to people today?

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God communicated the Day of Atonement through a series of clear images. In what ways do you think we can visualize the atonement God offers to us through Jesus? How well do you think we do in both articulating and visualizing that message?

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