Who does the scapegoat represent in Leviticus 16?

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The scapegoat most naturally represents the complete removal of Israel's sins from God's presence and from the covenant community. In Christian interpretation, it ultimately points to Jesus, who not only atoned for our sins through His sacrificial death but also bore them away once for all (Isa 53:6; John 1:29; Heb 9:26–28; 1 Pet 2:24). The scapegoat does not represent Satan making atonement for humanity, as some falsely claim.

On the annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the high priest selected two male goats and cast lots over them. One goat was sacrificed as a purification offering, and its blood was brought into the sanctuary to cleanse it from the defilement caused by Israel's sins (Lev 16:7–19). The second goat remained alive. The high priest laid both hands on its head, confessed over it "all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins," and sent it into the wilderness (Lev 16:20–22).

The two goats worked together to portray the complete work of atonement. The sacrificed goat showed how atonement was made through shed blood, while the living goat showed its result: the people's sins were carried away and were no longer counted against them. As Psalm 103:12 later puts it, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

What does "scapegoat" mean?

The traditional English term *scapegoat* (coined by Willliam Tyndale in 1530) is short for "escape goat"—the goat that was allowed to escape into the wilderness. The Hebrew text, however, calls it the goat "for Azazel" (Lev 16:8, 10, 26). The precise meaning of the Hebrew word *ʿazāʾzēl* is uncertain, and several interpretations have been proposed.

Some scholars understand *Azazel* as a reference to the goat's complete removal, perhaps meaning something like "the goat that departs." Others believe it designates a remote or rugged location in the wilderness. Still others understand Azazel as the name of a wilderness demon. This last interpretation became especially prominent in later Jewish literature, where Azazel was portrayed as a rebellious spiritual being.

Even if Azazel refers to a demonic being, however, the goat was not sacrificed to a demon. It was presented alive “before the LORD” (Lev 16:10) and then sent into the wilderness carrying Israel’s sins. On this reading, the ritual pictured those sins being expelled from God’s holy camp and returned to the realm of impurity and evil—figuratively thrown back in the face of the enemy. The ceremony therefore proclaimed God’s victory over sin, not the worship or appeasement of another spiritual power.

Does the scapegoat represent Jesus?

Leviticus does not explicitly identify the scapegoat with the Messiah, but the New Testament gives us good reason to understand the entire Day of Atonement as pointing forward to Jesus. The high priest, the sacrificed animals, the shed blood, and the removal of sin all find their fulfillment in him (Heb 9:11–14; 10:1–14).

Isaiah describes the coming Servant in language remarkably similar to the scapegoat ceremony: “The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all,” and “he bore the sin of many” (Isa 53:6, 12). Peter likewise says that Christ “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet 2:24). John the Baptist announces Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

We should not press every detail of the ritual into a rigid one-to-one correspondence. Jesus was not literally two goats, nor does every element of Leviticus 16 represent a separate person. Rather, the two goats together present a fuller picture of Christ’s saving work. His blood atones for sin, and He carries our guilt away. What the Day of Atonement portrayed symbolically and repeatedly, Jesus accomplished historically and permanently: “He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:26).

Does the scapegoat represent Satan?

Some religious groups teach that the scapegoat represents Satan, who will ultimately bear responsibility for the sins he caused God’s people to commit. This interpretation is sometimes connected with the view that Azazel is the name of a demonic being.

But Leviticus says the sins of Israel were placed on the goat as part of the atonement God provided for His people (Lev 16:10, 21–22). Scripture never teaches that Satan bears our sins, participates in our atonement, or removes our guilt. Jesus alone bore our sins and secured our forgiveness (Isa 53:5–6; Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 2:24). Satan will certainly be judged for his own rebellion and evil works (Matt 25:41; Rev 20:10), but his punishment does not contribute anything to our redemption.

Moreover, if Azazel is a demonic figure, the goat is better understood as carrying Israel's sins back into the wilderness—the symbolic realm of uncleanness and evil. That still does not make Azazel or Satan the bearer of Israel's guilt. The goat bears the sins, and God is the One who removes them.

Key Scriptures to Study

Lev 16:5–10 — Two goats are selected for the purification and removal of Israel's sins.

Lev 16:15–22 — One goat is sacrificed, while the other bears the people's sins into the wilderness.

Ps 103:8–12 — God removes the transgressions of His people as far as the east is from the west.

Isa 53:4–6, 11–12 — The suffering Servant bears the sins and iniquities of others.

John 1:29 — Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

2 Cor 5:21 — Christ, who knew no sin, was made sin for us so that we might become righteous in Him.

Heb 9:11–14, 24–28 — Jesus entered God's presence with His own blood and put away sin once for all.

Heb 10:1–14 — The repeated sacrifices of the law find their complete fulfillment in Christ's single sacrifice.

1 Pet 2:24 — Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross.

Objections & Misconceptions

"If Azazel is a demon, doesn't that mean Israel was offering a sacrifice to a demon?"

No. The living goat was presented before the Lord but was not slaughtered as a sacrifice to Azazel (Lev 16:10). Even if Azazel refers to a demonic being, the goat's removal symbolized sin being expelled from God's holy dwelling and returned to the desolate wilderness.

"The scapegoat must represent Satan because it was not killed."

That conclusion does not follow from the text. The two goats functioned together within one atonement ceremony: one displayed the shedding of blood, while the other displayed the removal of sin. Both aspects are fulfilled in Christ, whose death atoned for our sins and whose saving work

removes them from us.

“Does this mean Satan will eventually bear the sins of believers?”

No. The Bible consistently identifies Jesus as the One who bore our sins (Isa 53:6; Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 2:24). Satan will be judged for his own evil, but he plays no saving role in the atonement.

“Was the scapegoat punished for Israel’s sins?”

Leviticus emphasizes that the goat *carried away* Israel’s sins (Lev 16:22). The text does not describe the goat being tortured or executed. Its primary function was removal: Israel’s guilt was symbolically carried out of the camp and into a remote place.

Why This Matters

The scapegoat gives us a visible picture of one of the most comforting truths in Scripture: in Christ, our sins are not merely overlooked or temporarily covered. They are taken away. Jesus bore our guilt, cleansed us through His blood, and removed the barrier that separated us from God (Heb 9:14; 10:19–22).

Believers therefore do not need to live as if forgiven sins are still hanging over them. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). The Day of Atonement pointed forward to a redemption so complete that God promises, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (Heb 10:17).

Recommended Resources

- *The Book of Leviticus* by Gordon J. Wenham
- *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* by Jay Sklar
- *Leviticus* by Nobuyoshi Kiuchi
- *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* by L. Michael Morales
- *The Epistle to the Hebrews* by F. F. Bruce