

## A Christological Reflection on *Yom Kippur* from an Akan Christian Perspective

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### Abstract

*The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) is arguably the holiest and most important day in ancient Israel's religious calendar. In the Christian religion, the Yom Kippur ritual is interpreted to foreshadow the ultimate sacrifice made by Christ for the atonement of the sin of humanity. Therefore, a theological study of this Old Testament atoning ritual has the potential to shed light on the salvific ministry of Christ. Using a literary research approach, this article explores how atoning practices associated with Yom Kippur might enhance the Christian understanding of Jesus' atoning sacrifice. I argue that by fulfilling what the Old Testament sacrificial system prefigured, the cross renders any atoning sacrifice obsolete. Therefore, believers ought to refrain from any form of traditional religious sacrifices because such sacrifices have no salvific value. The paper contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on Christian soteriology, particularly the doctrine of atonement.*

**Keywords:** Akan; Atonement; Christ; Leviticus; Yom Kippur

### Introduction

Derived from ancient Israel's sacrificial traditions, Old Testament concepts of atonement relate closely with YHWH's covenant relationship with Israel, his chosen nation (Ekem 2005:22). The YHWH-Israel covenant obligated Israel to obey YHWH, who in turn was to protect and bless his people (Ekem 2005:22). It generally appears that atoning sacrifices were necessitated by Israel's failure to fulfill her covenant obligations, a situation which adversely affected YHWH's relationship with Israel. Atonement in the Old Testament may, therefore, be described as the Creator restoring the proper harmony of the positive relationship with the creature, which has been weakened, disturbed, or violated by the creature (Daly 2009:35).

Sin is the main thing that weakens, disturbs or violates the creature-Creator relationship. Failure to observe sacred ordinance, that is, failure to fulfill one's covenant responsibilities, constitutes sin with negative effect on one's relationship with YHWH, whether or not the sinner is aware of the sinfulness of their action or inaction (Daly 2009:35). As God's nation, ancient Israel conceived itself as a holy nation in the midst of massive threatening evil forces. Unatoned sin within Israel's camp let loose some of these forces to cause havoc on the land and its inhabitants. Sacrifices were, therefore, offered to renew and guarantee Israel's special union with God in order to enjoy his blessings and protection from evil powers.

Aside from regular sacrifices, Israel held an annual celebration—*Yom Kippur* (Lev. 16)—in which the high priest made atoning sacrifices to culminate the daily, weekly and

monthly sacrifices that had taken place throughout the year. According to the Christian faith, the *Yom Kippur* ritual foreshadowed the ultimate sacrifice made by Christ for the atonement of the sin of humanity. The need to develop a theology on the basis of the relationship between *Yom Kippur* and the event on the cross has prompted this article, which explores ways in which the atonement rituals performed on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) might prepare Christians to appreciate the nature and purpose of the cross.

With these introductory notes, the study proceeds to conduct a biblical-theological study of Leviticus 16:1–28.

## **Biblical-Theological reading of Leviticus 16:1–28**

### ***Narrative framework (vv. 1–2a)***

Leviticus 16 begins by placing the *Yom Kippur* ritual in a particular historical setting (v.1). After the death of Aaron's two sons, who approached YHWH in an unworthy and unauthorised manner (cf. Lev. 10:1–2), instructions regarding the celebration were given to Moses, to be conveyed to Aaron, the high priest. The contamination of the sanctuary, caused by Nadab and Abihu's sin and their subsequent death, aligns with the purification procedure outlined here (Milgrom 1991:1011). It appears evident that the author juxtaposes the unauthorised approach and death of Aaron's sons with the proper protocol for the high priest to enter God's presence without facing death.

### ***Preparation for the ceremony (vv. 2b–5)***

The preparation for the ceremony is prefixed by a limitation on the number of times that Aaron was to enter the Most Holy Place. Aaron was allowed to enter this place only once a year. A veil separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the tabernacle. Entering this sacred space without authorisation would result in the individual's death. The restriction on the frequency of Aaron's visits to the Most Holy Place served not only to safeguard the sanctity of the area but also to emphasise the importance of Aaron's spiritual, emotional, and physical preparation before conducting his priestly duties within it (Milgrom 1991:1012). The term "Most Holy Place" denotes the inner sanctuary housing the Ark of the Covenant, where YHWH communed with his people (Harris 1990:589). On top of the Ark rested the mercy seat, an integral piece featuring two cherubim with bowed heads and outstretched wings, facing each other in a kneeling position (Milgrom 1991:1014).

The first preparation for the *Yom Kippur* was made by Aaron (the principal celebrant). The chosen sacrificial victims were brought to the sanctuary, "a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering" (v.3 NIV). In addition to being in good health and without blemish, sacrificial animals were required to be well fed and not lean (Scurlock 2006:17). Blind, fractured, maimed animals or animals suffering from a running nose or eczema were unacceptable for a sacrifice (Lev. 19:1ff; 22:22; Mal. 1:7–10). While both male and female animals were acceptable for offering, males held greater value than females (Wenham 1979:55). With the exception of burnt and reparation offerings, there were no gender restrictions on sacrificial animals. The preference for male animals in these specific offerings may also reflect the patriarchal norms of ancient Israelite society, where males were typically esteemed more highly than females. No matter one's position on this, the fact remains that God required a highly valued animal for sacrifices.

The two offerings mentioned in verse 3—sin and burnt offerings—need further examination. The sin offering served various purposes: ceremonially cleansing individuals after childbirth (Lev. 12:6–8), following recovery from certain diseases (14:13–17, 22, 31; 15:15, 30), or for a Nazirite who had become ritually impure through contact with a corpse (Num. 6:11, 14, 16). It was also prescribed for unintentional transgressions of prohibitions (Lev. 15:25–29) (Vine 2015:361), and during specific festivals such as Passover (Lev. 28:22–24), the Feast of Weeks (28:30), the Feast of Booths (29:16, 19), the New Moon festival (28:15), the festival of Trumpets (29:5), and the Day of Atonement (29:11). An indication of the expiatory intention of the burnt offering is noted in Leviticus 1:4: “You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as **atonement** for you” (NRSV emphasis mine).

Another significant offering, the burnt offering, also known as the "ascending offering," symbolised complete consumption by fire (except for the skin), with the smoke and aroma rising heavenward (DeBroeck 2017:53). This offering was not exclusive to ancient Israel; it was also present in pre-Israelite civilisations like the Ugarit and Hittite (Walton, Matthews and Chavals 2000:120). The Hebrew term for "burnt offering" possibly originated from the Ugaritic word for "burnt" or from a word meaning "wholly" or "entirely" (Leviticus 6:22) (DeBroeck 2017:53). In Exodus 29:38–39, it is termed "continual," emphasising its ongoing necessity for Israel's atonement and purification as long as they continued to sin.

Prior to entering the Most Holy Place, Aaron was to prepare himself by bringing a bullock for his sin offering and a ram for his burnt offering (v.3), both for his own atonement as an individual. Additionally, he was to bring two goats and another ram for the people (v.5). On this special occasion, Aaron was to attire himself in the priestly garments, consisting of linen garments including a shirt, shorts, sash, and turban (v.4). The two male goats were designated for a single sacrifice, intended to cleanse the sins of the people. While one goat was sacrificed as a sin offering, the other was released alive into the desert (vv. 20–22).

### ***Lot-casting rite (vv. 6–10)***

Central to the Day of Atonement rituals was the sin offering involving two goats, a ceremony not mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament. Verses 6–10 delineate the sequence and organisation of events for the day. Aaron, representing all succeeding high priests, initiates atonement for himself and his family (the entire Aaronic priesthood) using a bull (v.7). The procedure is detailed in verses 11–14.

Lots are cast on the two goats to determine their destinies (v.8). This ensures that neither Aaron nor any other person dictates the fate of the goats; it is YHWH who selects which goat serves what purpose (Lavatai 2016:214). Thus, the casting of lots prevents Aaron and the congregation from making an erroneous choice and committing another sin against God.

The translation of the word "Azazel" (vv. 8, 10 [2 times], and 26) has sparked debate, yielding four main interpretations. The first regards Azazel as a descriptor for the dispatched goat ("scapegoat"), seen as "the goat that goes away or departs." This translation aligns with early English versions and certain ancient translations (Pinker 2007:12).

The second interpretation regards Azazel as a geographical location, described as "a rough and difficult place" or desert where the goat is sent on the Day of Atonement. This understanding stems from a midrashic interpretation of the phrase "erets gezerah" in verse 22 as "a rough and rocky terrain," supported by the Arabic terms 'azazu ("rough ground") or 'azâzilu ("jagged cliff/precipice") (Milgrom 1991:1020; Pinker 2007:9). Rashbam (referenced in Pinker 2007:9) identifies Azazel as the place where the live goat is sent to pasture (Exodus 3:1), akin to the birds of a leper (Leviticus 14:7). In this perspective, Azazel signifies a desert not in a negative sense of desolation but positively as a pasture where flocks and herds graze.

According to the third viewpoint, Azazel is understood as a proper name for a demon, deity, or spirit dwelling in the wilderness to which the live goat is dispatched. Support for this interpretation comes from syntactic parallels between "for YHWH" and laAzazel ("for Azazel") (v. 8), alongside Azazel's significance in post-biblical Midrashic literature (cf. 3 Enoch 4:6) (Milgrom 1991:1020). Textual evidence suggests that the desert to which the goat is sent (Leviticus 16:10, 22) teems with demons, strengthening the likelihood that Azazel is the name of such a being. Consistent with this notion, the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient Jewish texts identify Azazel as the leader of the angels who sinned in Genesis 6:1–4 (see Book of the Giants, 4Q203 frag. 7). Furthermore, Jewish texts from the Intertestamental period portray Azazel as a demonic figure (see 1 Enoch 8:1–2, 9:6, 10:4–8 and 13:1).

The fourth interpretation regards Azazel as an abstract concept referring to "destruction" or "complete removal" (Rooker 2000:271; Pinker 2007:10). Roskoff (cited in Pinker 2007:10) also views Azazel as a personification of impurities, suggesting that Azazel is not an entity to whom a sacrifice is made for atonement, but rather represents an abstract impurity in contrast to YHWH's absolute purity. Consequently, as the goat is sent into the wilderness, never to return, so too is Israel's sin completely eradicated.

Despite the challenge in precisely defining Azazel's nature, two fundamental biblical and theological principles must be emphasized. Firstly, both goats are identified as part of the same "sin offering" (v. 5), indicating that Azazel provides atonement for the people (v. 10) just as the sacrificial goat does. Secondly, the ritual involving Azazel (vv. 20–22) symbolises the thorough removal of Israel's transgressions from YHWH's presence. Thus, the two goats collectively represent both the propitiation for sins through death and the total elimination of sins for which atonement was sought. The slaughtered goat achieves the former through the shedding of its blood (vv. 15–20), while the scapegoat accomplishes the latter by bearing away Israel's sins on its head, carrying them away never to return.

### ***The sin offering for the high priest and his household (vv. 11–14)***

The process of making offerings for both the high priest himself (vv. 11–14) and for the people (vv. 15–20) is described vividly. After presenting his own bull as a sin offering and slaughtering it, Aaron was instructed to take "a censer full of coals of fire" (referred to as "coal of fire" in the literal translation) from "the altar," along with "two handfuls of sweet incense" from behind the curtain (v. 12). Milgrom (1991:1024) suggests that the burning of incense could be done either on the incense altar (Exodus 4:7) or in a portable censer, which might consist of a pan with a long handle (cf. Exodus 10:1; Numbers 16:6; 17:11) or an upright pan (cf. Ezekiel 8:11). The former was used twice daily by the high

priest (Exodus 30:7–8), while the latter could be used by any priest in the Tabernacle courtyard (Leviticus 10:1) and, on occasion, even outside the sacred area (Numbers 17:11–12).

According to Rooker (2000:372), the purpose of the "incense" was either to "conceal the atonement cover and thus protect the high priest, who would be standing close to the mercy seat, or to prevent the high priest from seeing God" (Exodus 24:15–18; 33:18–21; Leviticus 16:13). The "altar" mentioned here is the "incense altar" located in the sanctuary (cf. Exodus 40:5). The term "beaten" (or "fine") indicates that the incense was in powdered form. This incense, composed of spices and tree resins (including myrrh, a mollusk, galbanum, and frankincense), was crafted by skilled perfumers (see Exodus 30:34–38) and was not to be used for personal perfume due to its sacred nature, but for religious rituals (Milgrom 1991:1030).

After entering the *adytum*, the high priest ignited the incense in the censer before YHWH (v.13). The phrase "the cloud of the incense" (v.13) suggests that the smoke generated by the incense "in the dark shrine would enhance the solemnity of Aaron's work in the annual blanket atonement for Israel's sins" (Harris 1990:590). Lindsey (1983:197) proposes that the smoke formed a barrier preventing the high priest from "gazing at the Shekinah glory of God's presence over the atonement cover, thus averting divine wrath on himself." After offering the incense, the high priest returned to the courtyard to collect the blood of the slaughtered offerings. The entire purification ritual was to be performed in the presence of YHWH, indicated by the appearance of the cloud on the mercy seat (v. 13).

Some context on blood sacrifice in the Old Testament is pertinent for grasping this text. Blood sacrifice was a central aspect of Israel's religious practices, serving to restore and maintain a right relationship with God. Allison (2016:48) notes that blood sacrifices served various purposes, such as offering gifts, communion, propitiation, cleansing, averting evils or failures, and providing nourishment for Yahweh, while also impacting humans. Through this ritual, the offeror identified themselves with the victim, symbolising surrender, dedication, and substitution before its slaughter and the sprinkling of blood for atonement (Allison 2016:48). The sacrificial system in the Old Testament emphasises God's holiness and the necessity of atoning for every sin.

The initial blood manipulation ritual was the atonement of the Holy of Holies. The "blood" from the bull for both Aaron and his family was sprinkled once on the front of the "mercy-seat" and seven times before it (v.14). Aaron would later repeat this action with the blood of the goat for the congregation's sin offering (Leviticus 16:14–16a). The sprinkling of blood likely occurred in the air immediately in front of the Ark of the Covenant, with some blood landing on the front side of the box itself and some on the ground before it. This act aimed to cleanse the *adytum* of its impurities, with the number seven symbolising completeness, indicating the thorough purification of the *adytum* through the sevenfold sprinkling of blood.

### ***The sin offering for the people and atonement of the inner sanctum (vv. 15–16a)***

Following this, Aaron proceeded to slaughter the goat designated for YHWH, entering the Holy of Holies for the third time and treating the blood of YHWH's goat in the same manner as he treated the blood of the bull (v.15). Notably, there was no confession of sin or laying on of hands on the goat for YHWH. Consequently, its blood did not carry sin

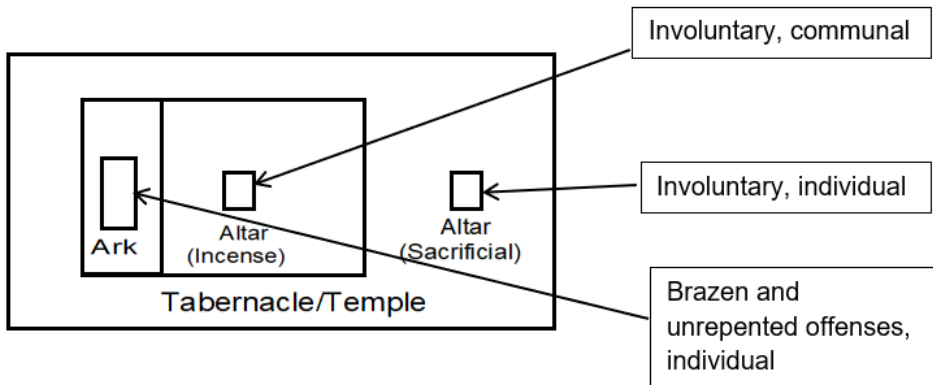
and thus did not defile, but instead purified, rendering it suitable for cleansing the entire sanctuary. Through this process, Aaron facilitated the purification of the people, ensuring that as the sanctuary was cleansed from all the sins committed by the community throughout the year, the people themselves were also purified.

Similarly, the ritual was performed with the blood of the goat designated for atonement for the people, involving the sprinkling of blood seven times before the altar and then smearing part of it on the horns of the altar (v.15; cf. Exodus 30:10). The sprinkling of blood on the altar symbolised reconciliation between God and the people: "human beings need not only and primarily to be purified, but to be reconciled with God, which is symbolically represented by the blood rite, occurring outside of them upon the altar" (Nicole 2004:49). The term "uncleanness" (v.16a) refers to "ritual impurities described in chapters 11–15 and the moral impurities generated by the violation of the prohibitive commandments," while *pesha* denotes "rebellion" or "transgressions," and "all their sins" collectively emphasise that all of Israel's sins, rather than their physical impurities alone, defile the sanctuary (Milgrom 1991:1034).

### ***The purgation in the outer sanctum and the outer altar (v. 16b, 18–19)***

The cleansing of the sanctum was effected through the sprinkling of the blood on the atonement cover and in front of it (v. 16b). The high priest also purged and consecrated the altar by taking some of the blood of the bull and of the goat and sprinkling some of it seven times on the altar using his finger (vv. 18–19). Milgrom (1991:257) has demonstrated that the gravity of sin and impurity correlates directly with the extent of its infiltration into the sanctuary. He outlines three avenues through which the sanctuary becomes contaminated. Firstly, the courtyard altars become tainted through an individual's unintentional transgression or severe physical impurity, necessitating purification by applying some of the blood from the sin offering on the altar's horn and pouring the remainder at its base (Leviticus 4:25, 30; 9:9). Secondly, the sanctuary is defiled by the inadvertent transgressions of the priest or the entire community, requiring the high priest to address it by sprinkling the blood of the sin offering on the inner altar and the curtain (Leviticus 4:5–7, 16–18). Thirdly, the innermost chamber (housing the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat) is polluted by a deliberate and unrepentant sin. Prior to contamination in the inner chamber, the same sin would have tainted the outer altar, the sanctuary, and the veil concealing the inner chamber. As there is no specific offering to address defiantly committed sins (Numbers 15:27–31), the pollution it causes must await the annual purification of the sanctuary on the Day of Atonement. A diagrammatic depiction of this relationship, adopted from Milgrom (1991:258), is shown below.

**Fig. 1: Relationship between sin and sanctuary**



***Purifying the community through the Azazel goat rite (vv. 20-22)***

Following the atonement for the Most Holy Place, the live-goat ritual unfolds with three distinct elements (vv.20–22). Firstly, there is the laying on of hands (v.21). This practice, specifically on a sacrificial victim, is pervasive throughout the book of Leviticus (1:4; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33; 16:21), as well as other sections of the Pentateuch (Exodus 29:10, 15, 19, Numbers 8:12). However, unique aspects of the Day of Atonement emerge here. Rather than the customary imposition of a single hand (cf. 1:4; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 24, 29, 33), Aaron places both hands upon the live goat (v. 21). Additionally, unlike the sacrificial protocols outlined in Leviticus 1–7, Aaron, the high priest, not the offeror, performs the laying on of hands. Scurlock (2006:25) elucidates that in this scenario, both hands are necessary—one for transferring the high priest's sin and the other for transferring the sins of the community. Regarding the second aspect, it is imperative to note that Aaron serves as a representative for the people in this context, mediating for the entire community and thus imposes his hands as a means of transferring the sins of the entire community onto the animal (see further discussions below).

The second element involves the imputation of sin to the goat. The phrase "and he shall put" (v.21) indicates that the laying on of hands entails a transfer of guilt from the individual to the sacrificial victim. The principle of vicarious substitution is evident in this rite, where the goat is received in place of the sinner, bearing the penalty for the sinner's transgressions. Generally, the laying on of hands served as the mechanism "by which sin (for the 'sin' offerings), guilt (for the 'guilt' offerings), illness, defeat, crop loss, or other disaster occasioned by YHWH's wrath (for the 'peace' offerings), or any or all of the above (for the holocaust)" was safely transferred to the sacrificial animal, which subsequently conveyed it to the altar and sanctuary through its sacrificial blood (Scurlock 2006:20).

The third element entails the sending of the live goat into the desert by a designated individual (not Aaron himself) (Leviticus 16:21). Since the preceding verses concluded the atonement for Aaron and the entire community, as well as the purification of the

entire sanctuary, the subsequent ritual involving the live goat does not impact the actual purification of the people and the sanctuary in any manner. As Musser (2015:158) articulates, "Through the blood of the purification offerings and the scapegoat, sin and its effects are completely removed from the entire community and the Tabernacle, in a moment of re-creation." The reason for not slaughtering this goat is likely that the ritual was not to be constituted as a sacrifice.

### ***Conclusion of the ceremony (vv. 23–28)***

Up to this point, the high priest has been attired in the simple white garments worn by ordinary priests (cf. v. 4), likely symbolising the importance of humility and holiness. As the formal atonement ritual concludes, the high priest removes these garments, undergoes a ritual bath, and dons his customary high priestly attire (v. 23). He then proceeds to offer burnt offerings of consecration, first for the priests and then for the people (v. 24). This sequence commences with a bath and now concludes with another bath (vv. 4, 24). The term "his garments" no longer refers to his priestly attire but rather to his regular clothing. It denotes "his own clothes" or "his other clothes."

Before departing for the camp, the individual who dispatched the live goat into the desert cleanses his attire and takes a bath. Lavatai (2016:222) explains that water bathing holds significance in this context due to its purifying properties. The culminating burnt offering of a bull and a goat in a fire outside the camp (vv. 27–28) carries significance for the occasion, as the animals utilised in the atonement rituals are consumed by fire outside the Tent of Meeting, rather than by the priest or the people.

Having examined the *Yom Kippur* rites, the paper proceeds to outline key continuities between atonement in the *Yom Kippur* and atonement on the cross with the purpose of demonstrating how the Levitical priestly tradition prepares the Christian believer to appreciate Christ's salvific life and works.

## ***Yom Kippur and the atonement of Christ***

### ***Atonement and priesthood***

In ancient Israel, as in traditional Akan society, atonement could not be achieved without an officiating priest. Priesthood in ancient Israel provided the means of mediation between God and humanity. Before the formal institution of priesthood in ancient Israel, the heads of families acted as priests and offered sacrifices on behalf of the household. Noah (Gen. 8:20) and Abraham (12:7 8) and Jacob (35:1-7) acted as priests for their household by offering sacrifices to God. Later, God chose the tribe of Levi to serve as priests (Ex. 28:1, 41, 43; Num. 3:10). The choice of the Levites might have been prompted by their refusal to serve the golden calf (Ex. 32:25 26). Among the priests was a high priest, who was to supervise the works of the other priests. The high-priestly role was reserved for the descendants of Aaron. Aaron was the first high priest. The high priest was an unblemished and blameless person ordained for priestly duties (Ex. 28 29; Lev. 21:6 8). Biblical-theological study of Leviticus 16 has shown the relevance of the high-priestly office in the *Yom Kippur* rituals. Without him, the people could not restore their broken relationship with God. He first made atonement for himself and then proceeded to atone for the sins of the people before purging the sanctuary, altar, and other parts of the tabernacle. Priesthood in the Old Testament, especially in the context of *Yom Kippur*, prepared Christians to appreciate the priesthood of Christ.



Jesus himself did not claim to be a priest. He did not qualify as a priest because he was not from the tribe of Levi, which was designated as the priestly tribe. Nonetheless, there are both explicit and implicit statements in the New Testament to the effect that Jesus was and is our High Priest. The following points can be gleaned from the Gospels regarding Jesus' priesthood. Firstly, Jesus claimed special relationship to the temple, where the high priest ministered, which in effect positioned him beyond the temple and what it signified (Matt. 12:6; Mark 14:57-58; John 2:19, 21) (Letham 1993:110). He placed his salvific work in a priestly context when he claimed to be the fulfilment of the temple and its cultic rituals (John 2:13-22). Apart from his assumption of a central place in Jewish feasts (John 7-8), Jesus' use of Psalm 110 in Mark 12:35-37 and Mark 14:62 (with Dan. 7) implies his identification of himself as a priestly king in the order of Melchizedek (Cullman 1967:88-89). Secondly, Christ's intercessory ministry points to his priesthood (Letham 1993:110). His prayer for Peter (Luke 22:31-32), and intercession for his followers (John 17) are two examples. The author of 1 Tim. 2:5 describes him as the sole mediator of God's relationship with humanity. Thirdly, Jesus interpreted his death as a seal of the new covenant that he came to establish (Mark 14:24). The establishment of this covenant was a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:31-34 (cf. Heb. 7:12). Jesus' interpretation of the Passover wine as his blood signifies Jesus' identification of himself as the Passover lamb whose blood was shed sacrificially (cf. Ex. 12). Finally, the priestly role of Christ underlines his pronouncement of blessings upon his disciples when he was about to depart from the earth (Luke 24:51; John 20:19) (Letham 1993:110).

The letter to the Hebrews devotes a great deal of space to Priestly Christology by providing a stimulating reinterpretation of the atoning practices from a Christological perspective. Significantly, the author locates the Christ-Event in a Jewish theological setting and thus affirms a progressive continuity between the dispensations of the Old and New Covenants. The writer considers Jesus' humanity as qualifying him to be high priest (2:11-18) (Morris 1972:288). As a human being, Christ was one with humanity in their weakness (5:1-10); he learned obedience through suffering (5:1-2), making him capable of sympathising with people in their sufferings (4:14-15). His human nature also qualified him to be a perfect representative of humankind on the cross. Like Aaron, Christ was appointed by God not based on lineage (Letham 1993:111).

On the basis of the superiority of Melchizedek over Abraham and Levi (Heb. 7:1-10), the author argues that Jesus' priesthood is eternal and overwhelmingly transcends the Levitical priestly order because he is a priest in the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 7:13-17). He then proceeds to justify the qualitative superiority of New Covenant on the basis that it addresses the weakness in the Old Covenant (8:7-13). The author establishes a typological relationship between these two covenants in which the earthly sanctuary is to be considered as a copy of the heavenly one: the sacrifices made in the Old Covenant are a shadow of the sacrifice made in the New. The letter then proceeds to emphasise the qualitative superiority of redemption through Christ's atoning sacrifice (9:11-14; cf. Purdy 1955:684). He also compares the Levitical High Priest (going through the curtain into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, cf. Lev. 16) with Christ (who by his sacrificing himself, and passing into heaven, takes up the highest and holiest "place" beside God) and establishes Christ's priesthood as surpassing all priests of all time in every society.

As a superior high priest, Christ offers a superior sacrifice. The next section says more about this.

### ***Atonement and Sacrifice***

Ancient Israelites made regular sacrifices to restore their relationship to YHWH. The regular sacrifices climaxed in a yearly sacrifice that was offered only by the high priest in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. The *Yom Kippur* celebration included two key religious offerings: sin offerings and burnt offerings. These sacrifices were both meant to restore the broken covenantal relationship that the people had with God. The sacrificial animals were innocent and so did not deserve to die. Their death, therefore, constituted a sacrifice. This understanding of the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice is necessary for appreciating the sacrificial nature of the event that took place on the cross.

That Christ was sinless is attested in several New Testament passages (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 3:5, 7). Being sinless and innocent, Christ did not deserve death. His death is, therefore, depicted as a sacrifice. Paul refers to Christ as someone who loved humanity to the extent that “he gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2 NIV). The assertions that Christ died “for sin” or “for sins” (cf. Rom. 8:3, RSV and 1 Pet. 3:18) draws from the Greek translation of the “sin offering” (Gk. *peri hamartias*) to underscore the sacrificial nature of Jesus’ death on the cross.

Even though atonement in both the *Yom Kippur* celebration and the event on the cross are based on sacrifices, there is a remarkable qualitative difference between the sacrifices involved in the two events. For Christian communities, the Old Testament *kippur* and other ancient Israel sacrifices were foreshadows of the ultimate sacrifice which Christ offered on the cross. The blood that was sacrificed on the cross is not that of animals (goats and calves) but the Son’s own unblemished blood which achieved what the blood of animals could not achieve (Heb. 9:12; 1 Pet. 1:19). Since sheep and goats are less valuable than a human (Matt. 12:12), their blood could not redeem humankind from their bondage to sin. Lewis and Demarest (2010:395) rightly observe that “The sacrifices offered by the Aaronic high priest on the Day of Atonement, effecting only ceremonial cleansing, failed to purge the inner life of the worshippers” (Heb. 10:4; cf. 9:9). The sacrifice that was made during *Yom Kippur* did not actually cleanse the offeror from sin, but rendered the sanctuary ritually clean for YHWH to dwell in. The impurities emitted from the transgressions of the Israelites contaminated the sanctuary and made it unclean for YHWH’s presence. The purgation of impurities of sin, however, could not deal with humanity’s sinful desires. The purgation facilitated Israel’s communion with YHWH, whose presence was symbolised by means of the cloud after an appropriate atonement was made (Exod40:34–35).

Unlike the Old Testament *kippur*, Jesus’ atonement cleansed our “conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:14). This removes the guilt of sin from the sinner and then equips them for every good work that God has planned for them. The cross achieved redemption, forgiveness, justification, and reconciliation by (among other things) soothing God’s anger and taking away the guilt of sin (Mat. 20:28; Mark 10:45; Rom. 3:25-26; 5:1-10; 1 Cor. 1:30; 5:19; Eph. 1:7, 14; Col. 1: 13-14, 19-20; Heb. 9:12; 1 Pet. 3:18) (Erickson 2013:832; Daly 2009:36; Letham 1993:139). The fact that Jesus’ blood is sufficient and effective for cleansing the inner soul of humans is evident in Matthew 23:26. The efficacy of Jesus’ blood in achieving what was foreshadowed in the

Old Testament is evident in its once-for-all nature as compared to the repetitious nature of the Levitical sacrifices (Heb. 9:10–12).

Furthermore, unlike the Old Testament sacrifice in which the victim was distinct from the priest, Christ served simultaneously as the sacrificial victim and the priest who offers the sacrifice (Heb. 9:10–12; Erickson 2013:829; Morris 1972:284). This thought is also expressed in Revelation 1:5, where Christ is described as the one “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (NIV). Based on this text, Letham (1993:122) rightly concludes that Christ “himself, in his own person, fulfilled the whole ritual of the Day of Atonement.” Christ’s death is also likened with the sin offering in the context of the *Yom Kippur* in that he died to sanctify his people through his blood (Heb. 13 cf. Lev. 16:3). This fact serves as the motivation for the writer’s encouragement to his addressees to go to Christ outside the camp to bear the disgrace he bore (Heb. 13:10–13).

Interestingly, Christ’s sacrifice was not meant for his benefit but for the benefit of others. The substitutionary dimension of atonement is discussed in the next section.

### ***Atonement and substitution***

Another basis for a Christological comparison between the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice and the death of Christ is the substitutionary nature of both sacrifices. In the *Yom Kippur* ritual, animals were sacrificed in place of the people of Israel. The death of the sacrificial animal during the *Yom Kippur* celebration signified the transfer of life to the human worshipper who had sinned and deserved death. The animal died to cover sins committed by humans, something for which it was not guilty. The victim was killed and its blood placed on the altar, resulting in the forgiveness of the sins of the offeror (Lev. 16:14–16; cf. 1:4; 4:20, 26, 31; 6:7). This means that the sacrificial victim was “the substitutionary representative” who bore the penalty of the worshipper’s sins and served as the means by which the penalty was taken from the worshipper (Letham 1993:133–134). The death of innocent animals sets free an otherwise doomed human being.

The substitution was carried out dramatically. Before the goat of Azazel was sent out into the wilderness, the priest placed his hands on its head, signifying a transfer of the people’s sin onto the goat. The goat carries the sins away and perishes in the wilderness for the people to live (Patterson 2007:555; Wenham 1979:235). In other blood sacrifices made by the Israelites, the worshipper laid his/her hands on the animal before killing it for its blood to be used as the sacrifice. The laying on of hands was a way by which the worshipper identified him/herself with the sacrificial animal and solemnly designated it as standing for him/her (Stott 2011:162). As Wenham (1979:237) observes, “it was a powerful visual aid that demonstrated the reality of sin and the need to eliminate it.” Whether in the case of the goat of Azazel or any other sacrifice, the laying on of hands by the offeror or the priest also symbolised the transfer of guilt onto the sacrificial victim, which then became a substitute for the worshipper (Lewis and Demarest 2010:384; Patterson 2007:555; Letham 1993:133). The imputation of the worshipper’s sin onto the sacrificial victim and the subsequent substitution are highlighted in the following pronouncement that was made while laying on of hands upon the live goat:

O God, thy people, the House of Israel, have committed iniquity, transgressed, and sinned before thee. O God, forgive, I pray, the iniquities and transgressions and sins which thy people, the House of Israel, have committed and transgressed and sinned

before thee; as it is written in the law of thy servant Moses, For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you: from all your sins shall ye be clean before YHWH (*Yoma* 6:2).

The most explicit statement about the substitutionary nature of *Yom Kippur* and other Old Testament sacrifices is found in Leviticus 17:11: “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” (NRSV). The text gives three significant affirmations about blood. Firstly, blood symbolises life (Stott 2011:163; Lewis and Demarest 2010:384). The eating of blood is prohibited because of its close connection with an animal’s life. Secondly, blood makes atonement (Stott 2011:163). When one life is lost through the shedding of lifeblood, another life is spared from death. One can, therefore, consider the animal whose blood makes atonement for the worshipper as dying in the worshipper’s stead. Stott (2011:163), therefore, rightly asserts that “No forgiveness without blood” means “no atonement without substitution.” For atonement to be effected, there has “to be life for life or blood for blood” (Stott 2011:163). Thirdly, blood was given by God for atoning purposes; therefore, the Old Testament sacrificial system is divinely given, not human initiative to placate God (Stott 2011:163; Lewis and Demarest 2010:384).

The substitutionary nature of the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice prepares the Christian believer to appreciate the vicarious nature of Christ’s death. Both the Old and New Testaments have passages that teach that Christ died in the stead of humanity. Isaiah 53, foreshadowing Christ’s death according to its interpretation in the New Testament, depicted him as the servant of YHWH upon whom all the sins of the people were laid (v.6). In verse 3, Isaiah for Christian interpreters portrays Jesus as despised and rejected, echoing the rejection Jesus faced during his earthly ministry. Verse 5 speaks directly to Jesus being pierced for humanity’s transgressions and bearing the punishment for our sins, offering healing through his wounds. Isaiah 53:7 is thus used by Christian interpreters to emphasise Jesus’ silent submission to his fate, akin to a lamb led to slaughter, mirroring Jesus’ willingness to endure the cross for the sake of humanity’s salvation. Finally, verse 9 is interpreted as prophesying Jesus’ burial with the wicked and ultimately with the wealthy, fulfilling the details of his death and burial. These verses in Isaiah 53 for Christians paint a vivid picture of Christ’s sacrificial death, centuries before his birth, showcasing how he fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and became the ultimate atonement for humanity’s sins.

This is echoed in John the Baptist’s description of Christ as the Lamb of God who carries away the sin of the world (John 1:29; cf. 1 Tim. 2:5–6). Jesus himself said he came to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Paul makes a similar point when he asserts that “Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8; cf. 15:3; 1 Cor. 5:7) (cf. Letham 1993:133; Erickson 2013:830; Lewis and Demarest 2010:389). He also says Christ, who knew no sin, was made sin for humankind so that in him people would be made righteous (2 Cor. 5:21). Here, Paul talks about the imputation of the sins of humanity upon Christ and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness upon humanity. Paul also describes the Christ’s atonement as a means of becoming a curse for humanity in order to redeem them from their curse (Gal. 3:13). Paul is not saying that Christ was made a sinner; he says Christ knew no sin. Rather, he is saying that Christ was made to suffer for the sin of

others. The idea of the substitutionary nature of Christ's death is again taught in Hebrews 9:28, where Christ is said to have taken away humanity's sins through his atoning death on the cross (cf. 1 Pet. 2:24). 1 Peter 3:18 also alludes to the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ when it says that the righteous suffered for the unrighteous. Considering the cross in the light of the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice helps one to appreciate that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22). In effect, Jesus is for us what the sin-laden *Azazel* goat was for ancient Israel. This led Rylaarsdam (1962:314) to call the *Yom Kippur* the "Good Friday of the OT."

### **An Akan Christian reflection**

The Akan people of Ghana constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the country. They reside primarily in the central and southern regions, such as the Ashanti Region, Bono and Ahafo regions, the Central Region, the Eastern Region, and parts of the Western Region. With a rich cultural heritage, the Akan celebrate vibrant traditional ceremonies and festivals, and are renowned for their craftsmanship and expertise in gold mining. The Akan language, Twi, is widely spoken among them, although dialectal variations exist among different subgroups. The Twi language of the Akan originated from a Bono King, Nana Twi whose language became known as Twi's language (Twi kasaa). While many Akan adhere to traditional beliefs and practices, Christianity and Islam have also gained significant followings within the community.

The Akan religious worldview revolves around a supreme deity (*Nyame* or *Onyame*), who is credited with creating the universe and all life; he is more powerful than any other being in the universe (Quarcoopome 1987:41; Acheampong 2014:62). Alongside *Nyame*, there exist ancestors, lower divinities, spirit powers and other supernatural beings. Ancestors hold significant sway in Akan belief, as their spirits are thought to persist and influence their descendants' lives. According to Akan beliefs, ancestors hold spiritual authority during family gatherings, maintain societal order, dispense justice by punishing wrongdoing and rewarding virtue as guardians of moral conduct, shield individuals from illnesses, serve as intermediaries between humanity and the divine, and advocate for humanity before higher powers (Quarcoopome 1987:43; Ephirim-Donkor 2018:22–23). There is also the belief in the existence of spirit powers that may inhabit natural objects. These spirits may be benevolent or malevolent, depending on the relationship with the one involved. The Akan pantheon also comprises lower divinities (*abosom*), who are the sons and daughters of the Supreme Being. Abosom are associated with specific attributes or functions, such as fertility, protection, or justice, and are often linked to natural elements or phenomena. They are revered and honored through rituals, prayers, and sacrifices, with the aim of seeking their guidance, blessings, or intervention in various aspects of life.

All these beings are more powerful than humans and may affect them positively or negatively. Found in the midst of all these supernatural entities, the Akan feel the need for protection and the need to maintain a harmonious relationship with these beings. Therefore, regular (daily, weekly and yearly) sacrifices are made to achieve peace, protection, prosperity and fertility (Quarcoopome 1987:43). The next section considers some of these sacrifices.

### Sacrifices in Akan context

In Akan traditional religion, sacrifices (Fante: *afɔr*; Bono-Twi *afɔreɛ/afɔdeɛ*) are integral to religious rituals and ceremonies, serving various purposes such as appeasing spirits, seeking blessings, or expressing gratitude. Among the types of sacrifices observed, animal sacrifices are perhaps the most common. Animals like chickens, goats, sheep, and occasionally larger animals such as cows may be offered. The choice of the sacrificial animal depends on the status of the worshipper, the nature of the request or the significance of the occasion. The blood of these animals is collected and offered to the gods or poured onto sacred objects or places as a symbol of reverence and purification. Additionally, food offerings are made to deities or spirits, including fruits, grains, cooked meals, or beverages like palm wine, reflecting cultural preferences and the preferences of specific deities.

Libations, involving the pouring of liquids such as water or alcohol, are also common offerings to ancestors or spirits, typically accompanied by prayers or invocations.

The Akan perform different types of sacrifices for different purposes. Some of these sacrifices are noted and outlined briefly below (gleaned from Wiafe, Anson and Enam 2016:2520). Firstly, propitiatory sacrifice is typically performed in response to threats to societal security, such as famine or calamity, prompting elders to consult traditional diviners to appease the gods. In severe crises, even human sacrifices may be deemed necessary. There is also substitutionary sacrifice, which entails providing a substitute to mitigate the wrath of divinity or evil spirits. The substitute, often a sheep, stands in place of the afflicted individual, reflecting a cultural belief in the need for a sacrificial offering to alleviate suffering. The Akan also have mediatory sacrifice which aims at bringing two estranged parties together. Communion sacrifice symbolises the unity between a deity and the worshipper. Another sacrifice is the gift sacrifice which entails offering a favour or an item to someone else without anticipating any reciprocation. Atoning sacrifice in traditional beliefs is depicted as the restoration of harmony between divinity and humanity, recognising the inherent inability of humans to rectify estrangement from God.

Even though Akan traditional sacrifices are done on daily basis, they become very prominent during traditional festivals. The Akwapims of the Eastern Region celebrate the Odwira (purification) festival. They use this occasion to seek the favor and blessings of the gods and ancestors. They hold that this purification ritual requires the sacrifice of a ram without defect, as ordained by their spiritual leaders (Wiafe, Anson and Enam 2016:2521). They offer the blood of the sacrificial animal to the gods and ancestors in order to achieve the renewal and purification essential for their collective prosperity, progress, and overall well-being in their homeland (Wiafe, Anson and Enam 2016:2521). Similarly, during the Munufie festival, celebrated by the people of Japekrom in the Bon region of Ghana, the traditional leaders make sacrifices on behalf of their people to effect spiritual cleansing. For example, after returning from the Pru River, where the traditional stools are given ritual bathing, the *omanhene* (paramount chief) goes into the stool room, kills a ram and offers its food to the stool and ancestors (Anane-Agyei 2012:107). He also pours libation and asks for blessings from the ancestors and the gods for his people and himself.

In relation to the *Yom Kippur* and Christ's atoning sacrifice, the Aboakyer festival celebrated by the Effutu people needs special examination. In his comparative analysis

of atonement rituals within the Aboakyer festival of the Effutu community in Ghana and the Yom Kippur observance in ancient Israel, Takyi (2015) posits that the Old Testament sacrificial system, including the Yom Kippur festival, was established by God to underscore the significance of blood in achieving purification, redemption, and reconciliation. He notes that the climax of these rituals, particularly during Yom Kippur, involves elaborate purification ceremonies, notably the ritual involving the Lord's goat and the goat for Azazel. Identifying several similarities between the Aboakyer festival and Yom Kippur, including the timing of celebration, the role of priests, purification rituals, and animal sacrifices, Takyi (2015:179) notes that the *Yom Kippur* festival uniquely prefigures the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, unlike the Aboakyer festival. Moreover, he points out that the absence of the Azazel goat ritual in the Aboakyer festival distinguishes it from Yom Kippur. Despite these differences, Takyi (2015:180) contends that the concept of atonement within the Aboakyer festival serves as an effective conduit for disseminating the Christian gospel, which centres on the sacrificial death of Christ. He draws parallels between the blood sacrifices in the Aboakyer festival and the cleansing power of Jesus Christ, emphasising their shared aim of spiritual purification.

The foregoing underlines that the atoning power of sacrifices is well-known in Akan society. In the following section, the paper considers how the atonement of Christ supersedes any Akan traditional sacrifice.

### **The superiority of Christ's sacrifice over Akan tradition sacrifices**

The superiority of Christ's sacrifice over Akan traditional sacrifices is attested by the uniqueness, completeness, and universality of his atonement. Within Christian theology, Christ's sacrifice is regarded as a singular event, unparalleled in its efficacy and significance (Heb. 10:10). Moreover, the completeness of Christ's sacrifice is emphasised in Christian doctrine. His death is believed to have fully reconciled humanity with God, providing forgiveness for all sins—past, present, and future (Col. 2:13–14). In contrast, Akan traditional sacrifices often involve repetitive rituals and offerings that may provide temporary relief or appeasement but do not offer a permanent solution for sin or spiritual reconciliation. Additionally, the universality of Christ's sacrifice is a cornerstone of Christian faith. It transcends cultural, ethnic, and geographical boundaries, offering redemption to all people, regardless of their background (John 3:16). This universality stands in contrast to many traditional religious practices, which may be confined to specific cultural contexts. Akan traditional deities are confined to some jurisdiction. They have supposed power of certain aspects of life and/or certain days. Consequently, traditional religious sacrifices in Africa are often confined to specific tribes, regions, or cultural contexts. For example, certain sacrifices may be performed only by specific clans or during particular festivals. The message of Christ's sacrifice is one of inclusivity, inviting all individuals to experience the transformative power of his love and forgiveness. This is possible because Christ's sacrifice was made to the God of all creation whose power knows no bounds.

Furthermore, the spiritual transformation brought about by Christ's sacrifice sets it apart from traditional sacrifices. Christianity teaches that his sacrifice not only provides forgiveness of sins but also brings about a profound change in individuals, renewing their hearts and minds (2 Cor. 5:17). This transformative power is central to the Christian

faith, offering believers the opportunity to experience newness of life and a deepened relationship with God. While traditional Akan sacrifices may offer ritualistic purification or appeasement of spiritual forces, they may not necessarily bring about the same lasting spiritual change in individuals. Traditional Akan sacrifices lack the ability to transform the heart of the worshipper. For example, sacrifices made for fertility or protection may provide immediate benefits, but they do not necessarily lead to a deeper relationship with the divine or inner spiritual renewal. Given the superiority of Christ's sacrifice to any other sacrifice, Akan Christians are urged to rely solely on Christ for their spiritual and physical needs.

## Conclusion

The study has shown that the Old Testament *Yom Kippur* celebration has much to offer for the Christian understanding of the doctrine of atonement because the nature and meaning of the rituals associated with the event are strikingly analogous with Jesus' death on the cross. The *Yom Kippur* ceremony provides insights into the atoning work of Christ on the cross in explicit and perceptive ways. From the Christian perspective, Christ's death has ushered the cosmos into the Day of Atonement, which unlike the Levitical sacrificial rites, is not a yearly sacrifice but a once-for-all sacrifice that brings perpetual peace. The superiority of Christ's atonement should serve as an encouragement for believers to refrain from any form of traditional religious sacrifices because such sacrifices have no salvific value. The paper pointed out that the inferiority of Akan traditional sacrifices compared to Christ's sacrifice lies in their incompleteness, limited scope, and inability to bring about lasting spiritual transformation. Christ's sacrifice, on the other hand, is viewed as complete, universal, transformative, and unparalleled in its efficacy, offering forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life to all who believe. Finally, any doctrine of priesthood must start and end with Christ who is the perfect and incomparable priest. This is because Christ is the foundation of all legitimate priesthood.

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