

Bite Size Bible Study

Sheep & Goats pt 2 #73

By Pastor Lee

There are three Bible stories that have been drawn on, rightly or wrongly, in the connection of goats with evil and the devil. Here we will discuss the first one the "Scapegoat"

The Scapegoat

Leviticus 16 contains instructions for the rituals that the Israelites were to observe each year on the Day of Atonement. A key part of that observance was the ritual of Azazel, traditionally (and I believe wrongly) translated "scapegoat":

Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting; and Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord, and offer it as a sin offering; but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel. (Leviticus 16:6-10)

Azazel is the name of the place (or as some interpret it, the power) to which one of the goats in the Temple service of the Day of Atonement was sent. There is a great deal of confusion regarding the exact meaning of this word. In the Hebrew Bible, the word Azazel occurs only in these three verses plus verse 26 in the same chapter. Its exact meaning and origin has been a matter of great dispute. The word "Azazel" itself seems to mean "Azaz" (rugged), and "el" (strong), and is the place, to where the goat is sent.

The scapegoat had a positive function in Israelite worship, in that it symbolically carried away the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement. However, because of its association with sin, in ancient lore it was also sometimes associated with evil and the Devil. This function of the goat as the scapegoat, is one source in the Bible for the association of goats with evil. However the other goat is not associated with evil.

The goat, which was dispatched, was not a sacrifice since it was not ritually slaughtered. From the actual (translated) verses it is not even certain whether the goat was killed. The goat was dispatched in order to carry the sins of Israel into the wilderness, to cleanse the people of their sins. This is also the reason why the ritual took place on the Day of Atonement.

A detailed description of the ritual in the Second Temple period is found in the Mishnah in the general description of the service (*avodah*) for the Day of Atonement.

The high priest cast lots. Upon one, the word *L-YHWH* ("for Yahweh") was written and upon the other *La-'Azazel* ("for Azazel"). After he had drawn the lots, on the head of the goat chosen for Azazel he bound a thread of crimson wool and stood the animal opposite the gate through which it would ultimately be taken.

After the high priest had performed several other rituals he returned to the goat, placed his hands on it and confessed: O God, your people, the house of Israel, has sinned and transgressed before You.... He then handed the goat over to the person who was going to take it, called *l' sh 'Itti*, i.e., the man who had been prepared for that time (*et*). Although any Jew was qualified to fulfill this function, the high priests did not allow non-priests to do it.

When the *l' sh 'Itti* reached the cliff, he pushed the goat over it, backwards. It hardly took halfway down before it was completely dismembered.

What does it Mean?

Looking back from our perspective it is strikingly similar to Jesus' purpose in atoning for the sins of the world. All of the sins of the world were laid on Him and He was flogged and crucified (i.e. tossed off a cliff).

"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"

Matthew 20:18-19

It is even interesting that the chief priests were in charge of the scapegoat's death and the sentencing Jesus to death.

Rather than the scapegoat being a symbol of evil, could it have been a foreshadowing of the Messiah?

Instead of a ceremony that needed to occur every year to cleanse just Israel, Jesus sacrifice provided the removal the sins of all people – Never to be remembered again.

Next we will look at Daniel 8: The Ram and the Goat

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