Who Fulfills The Azazel Goat—Satan Or Christ? (Part One)

by David C. Grabbe
Forerunner, "Ready Answer," January-February 2017

The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) is a Sabbath of solemn rest, set apart by its unique requirements to afflict one’s soul and do absolutely no work (Leviticus 23:26-32). Within its instructions are a few rituals that make it even more extraordinary. Chief among these is the ceremony of the two goats found in Leviticus 16, part of a larger cleansing ritual performed once a year by the high priest.

With the passage of time and the difficulties of translation, the instructions for the two goats are far less clear to us than they were to their original recipients. In particular, the Hebrew word azazel, used for the second goat, is surrounded by speculation and contradictory assertions. A common belief among Sabbatarians is that azazel is the name of a wilderness demon. From this foundation springs the conclusion that the azazel goat—often translated as “scapegoat”—represents Satan. (See the inset, “The Azazel Tradition,” below.)

If we solely use the Bible as our source, we will find no definitive statement for azazel representing Satan. What appears instead is that Satan—whose original name was Helel—has coopted the term to apply to himself in the same way he coopted one of the titles of Jesus Christ, “light-bringer” or “light-bearer” (Lucifer), for himself (see Isaiah 14:12; II Peter 1:19; Revelation 22:16). Yet it is not possible for Satan to be a part of the atonement God provides for His people, a role that can be fulfilled only by the Savior.

Strong’s Concordance does not define azazel as a name at all, instead giving the meaning as “goat of departure.” It identifies two roots for this word, the first of which means “goat” or “kid” (#5795). The second root (#235) means “to go away, hence, to disappear.” The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon says it means “complete removal.” These definitions not only fit with the Hebrew, but they also align with the instructions in Leviticus 16. But to start with azazel as the name of a fallen angel—representative of Satan—is, at best, to begin with a conclusion, and at worst, to base crucial understanding on an apocryphal tradition. When we look at the totality of what Scripture says, a very different picture emerges.

There is wisdom in not basing a doctrine on the meaning of a word, since meanings can change or become lost with time. A far more solid foundation beyond a word’s common definition must be laid. Moving past the definition of azazel, then, another foundational principle of Bible study is that significant matters—especially doctrinal ones—must be established by “two or three witnesses.” By comparing what the azazel goat accomplishes with the rest of God’s revelation, its role—and thus, its identity—becomes clear. There is no second, let alone third, witness for Satan playing a role within this chapter or in the atonement for sin.

Two Goats, One Offering

The two goats are first mentioned in Leviticus 16:5, which contains an often-overlooked detail: “And he shall take from the congregation of the children of Israel two kids of the goats as a sin offering, and one ram as a burnt offering” (emphasis ours throughout unless otherwise noted).
The “two kids of the goats” together are a single sin offering. That is, the two young goats are distinct elements that jointly accomplish this offering for sin; both parts are absolutely required for the offering to be accepted. A typical sin offering consists of only one animal, but this sin offering consists of two. This shows that something additional is being accomplished here, something beyond just the payment for sin.

The biblical sin offering, detailed in Leviticus 4, is God’s prescribed way to show sins being paid for through a death. While “it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4), God still required blood to be shed to remind the people that sin incurs the death penalty.

A critical part of the sin offering involves the priest placing his hands on the head of the animal before it was slain to show that the animal would stand in the place of the party under judgment. The unblemished, innocent animal, representing the guilty party, symbolically received the guilt. This detail is reiterated four times within the instructions for the sin offering (Leviticus 4:4, 15, 24, 29), as well as in the initial consecration ceremony for Aaron and his sons (Exodus 29:10). A sin offering is incomplete without this symbolic transference taking place.

Every sacrificial animal—through the requirement of it being unblemished—is portrayed as being sinless (Deuteronomy 17:1; Leviticus 22:17-25). The Pentateuch contains at least forty injunctions that the sacrificial animals, either in specific offerings or in general, had to be without blemish or defect. In addition, Malachi 1:6-14 records God’s indignation at later priests for offering blind, maimed, and diseased animals. A reason the animals had to be of the highest quality is that they were offered to God, who deserves only the best. A second reason is that every sacrificial animal prefigured the Savior, who was entirely without blemish or defect.

In the symbolism of a substitutionary sacrifice, an innocent participant is chosen to bear the sins of the guilty. However, this utterly fails to apply to Satan, for his millennia of sin make it impossible for him to be pictured as unblemished or innocent. Not by any means!

Leviticus 16:8 has Aaron casting lots, “one lot for Jehovah, and one lot for a goat of departure,” as Young’s Literal Translation renders it. This first biblical occurrence of lots being cast shows that the matter of choosing what goat fills which role is completely in God’s hands. The high priest had to await God’s decision before continuing. God does not leave it up to man to choose which would fulfill these roles because of man’s inability to judge properly.

This fact was made especially clear during Christ’s lifetime, when the people chose to spare Barabbas from crucifixion over Jesus (Matthew 27:17-23), and the high priest Caiaphas chose Jesus to die for the people (John 11:49-50). The people and leaders chose Jesus, not because of their recognition of and devotion to Him, but for His condemnation so that their lives could continue without disruption.

In similar fashion, left to their own devices, the Israelites would incorrectly choose how the God-ordained roles would be filled, so He shows through the casting of lots that the decision was not in their hands. I Chronicles 24-26 shows that governmental roles in Israel were determined by lot. To remove any ambiguity, various officials, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, and other leaders were assigned their lots in life through God’s decision. The same thing occurs in Leviticus 16: God determines which goat will fulfill which role.
“For the LORD”

The matter of the different roles becomes clear after understanding Leviticus 16:8. A difficulty springs up here, though, because the construction seems to imply two separate personalities: One lot is cast “for the LORD,” and another “for azael.” However, if we look deeper, we will see that the phrase “for the LORD” is not about identifying a personality at all.

Because we have the benefit of looking back in history on Christ’s sacrifice and understand that the sacrificial system pointed forward to the work of the Messiah, our minds tend to interpret “for the LORD” to mean “as a representation of the Lord.” While the sin offerings did pre-figure Christ, the phrase was not intended to mean this, but that the first goat was designated “as belonging to the LORD.”

It is used in the same sense that the sacred incense was “holy for the LORD” (Exodus 30:37), that in wartime the Israelites were to “levy a tribute for the LORD” (Numbers 31:28), and that an idolatrous city was to be completely burned “for the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 13:16). The first goat’s role was to appease the Lord and to be sacrificed to Him; it was for the Lord’s satisfaction in the ritual, not to represent Him.

Consider that the Israelites did not truly understand the intent of the sacrificial system. During the first century, the concepts that the Messiah would be God-in-the-flesh and that He would be killed in fulfillment of the whole sacrificial system were entirely foreign. If there was ever a national consciousness that the first goat was a representation of the Creator God, dying for the sins of the people, it was clearly forgotten by the time it was fulfilled!

Even though we can now read various psalms and prophecies related to the crucifixion and recognize them as Messianic, the Israelites did not have this understanding; they thought the Messiah would be a human leader who would restore them to national greatness. In like manner, they certainly understood, not that one of the goats would represent the Lord, but that the goat was a sacrifice to the Lord. The instructions do not specify how the ritual would later be fulfilled—only what the goats were for.

The Goat of Departure

Along these lines, azael is not a name in the Bible, nor did the live goat represent a second personality, but instead it fulfilled a second purpose. It was chosen to accomplish just what the Hebrew root word means: departure, removal, or disappearance. The first goat was for the Lord because His justice must be satisfied; it was for the cleansing of His house (Tabernacle and people). The second goat was for an additional step: completely removing the sins from view by bearing them to an uninhabited land. Thus, while many infer that two personalities are in view in Leviticus 16:8, the construction does not require it. Rather, the lots were cast to determine which goat would fulfill each role within this compound atonement for sin.

No scripture supports the notion that Satan has been chosen to fulfill any sacrificial role. God gave Helel a role, but he chose his own lot in life when he lifted his heart in pride and left his first estate (Jude 6). God did not choose that for him. Conversely, Matthew 12:18 quotes a Messianic prophecy about the Servant whom God chose—Jesus Christ. Similarly, I Peter 2:6 says that Christ is elect, another way of saying “chosen.” We have evidence of the lot applying to Jesus Christ because God chose Him. He was also chosen to fulfill the sin offering, the burnt offering, the meal offering, the
Passover, and the Wavesheaf as well. God chose Him to be High Priest (Hebrews 5:10; 9:11). But the Scriptures completely preclude Satan from receiving such honor.

Another, often-overlooked instruction in this regard is the ritual for the cleansing of leprosy, found in nearby Leviticus 14:3-7 (for people) and 49-53 (for houses). It contains similar figures and activities as the ritual of the two goats, and is a type of the more important Day of Atonement ritual. Involving two birds instead of two goats, it functions on the level of an individual or a family (house) rather than the nation. In considering the lesser ritual, nothing suggests that the two birds are somehow opposites or represent opposing personalities. Instead, the birds are two essentially equal elements, each chosen to serve a different role to accomplish a single purpose. The two goats are likewise two equal actors, which again precludes Satan, for the only place he is equal to Jesus Christ is in his own estimation!

A detail in the leprosy ritual clarifies a part of the ritual with the two goats. The bird that is set free is dipped in the blood of the one that is killed (Leviticus 14:6, 51), showing that a cleansing or sanctification is made for the bird that is then freed. This is more obscure in the instruction for the goats, but can be found in Leviticus 16:10: “But the goat on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make atonement upon it, and to let it go as the scapegoat into the wilderness.”

The NKJV here says atonement is made upon the goat, which is a reasonable translation since ‘al is simply a preposition with any number of English equivalents. Other translations and commentators, such as the Companion Bible and the Cambridge Bible, hold that here ‘al indicates for the live goat—that is, the goat is presented alive before the Lord to make atonement for it. Ellicott’s Commentary makes this observation: “Better, to make atonement for it, that is, it was placed before the Lord in order that it might receive expiation and sanctification, and thus be fitted for the sacred purposes it was destined to fulfil” (emphasis theirs).

Scripture backs up this observation. The azazel parallels the live bird that was dipped in the blood of the sacrificed bird and then let go. A sanctification had to take place before the second animal (bird or goat) could fulfill its role. Even though Jesus had no need to be cleansed from sin, He was still sanctified (John 10:36). In contrast, no sacrifice is ever mentioned for Satan's “sanctification” prior to fulfilling an imagined sacrificial role.

This sanctification is further indicated by the phrase “shall be presented alive before the Lord.” Numerous verses imply this same sense when one person “stands before” another of higher authority, whether God or another man. The “standing before” can be for rendering judgment (Leviticus 27:8, 11; Numbers 5:16-18; 35:12) or to show that a person is in the service of another (Genesis 41:46; Numbers 27:18-23; Deuteronomy 1:38; 10:8). In either case, what is symbolized is an inferior waiting on a decision or instruction from his superior (see also Genesis 43:15; 47:7).

The azazel is not brought before the Lord for the sake of judgment (Leviticus 16:10), since it is the symbol of innocence at this point, as the priest has not yet laid his hands on its head. Instead, the goat stands before the Lord in order to be sanctified, receiving its charge to bear the burden of sin and depart out of sight.

In both the leprosy and the Day of Atonement rituals, one animal is killed while another is set free, with the implication of bearing the uncleanness (in the case of leprosy) or sins (in the case of the azazel) to another place. The single sin offering has two aspects: 1) the sacrifice for the payment or
propitiation for sin, and 2) the complete removal of sin from view—including from memory and the consciousness. God sees to both the payment for and removal of sin; even our conscience is cleansed (see Isaiah 43:25; Psalm 103:12; Hebrews 9:14).

What is accomplished, then, is more than just payment for sin. The ritual makes use of two animals to show different features of this unique sin offering. One animal died as a type of payment, so that justice would be satisfied. The other remained alive to demonstrate the complete removal of sin from view. Without this aspect, our sins could be paid for yet still plague us, as the payment of sin solves only part of the problem.

Consider what happens when a person commits a crime. Civil justice may be served through fines, incarceration, or capital punishment, but a record of the infraction remains. The felon’s name is permanently tainted, and assuming he is not executed, he will face significant challenges from society even after the state’s justice has been served.

In addition, his sentence does nothing to heal the pain he has caused others, let alone cleanse his own conscience. Thus, what is needed is a complete expunging of his crime, so that his past failures are not only paid for, but are also made to depart from all awareness.

The same principles apply to the problem of sin. It is the work of Jesus Christ that brings about the ultimate solution to sin, not the binding of Satan. What we need is to have God’s laws written on our new hearts and for our sins to be remembered no more. That is what our Savior does.

Is there a single verse in the Bible that shows Satan accomplishing this? Where is the second witness that shows the blemished, corrupt Adversary as set apart for this incredible purpose?

Inset: The Azazel Tradition

When studying Leviticus 16, the typical approach hinges on defining the word azazel, the Hebrew word for the second goat. However, difficulties begin right at the outset because no obvious definition scripture exists.

Scholars are little help in arriving at a definition, for scholars can be found to support whatever view one desires. A typical explanatory note is found in The Comprehensive Commentary of the Holy Bible, which gives this unrooted viewpoint: “See different opinion in Bochart. Spencer, after the oldest opinions of the Hebrews and Christians, thinks Azazel is the name of the devil, and so Rosenmuller, whom see.” Yet, if the wise of this age cannot give scriptural backing for their views, of what value is their scholarship? Are the “oldest opinions of the Hebrews and Christians” based on the Word of God or dependent upon a heretical book and the traditions of men?

Many have based their understanding of Leviticus 16 on tradition, which claims that azazel is the name of a fallen angel. The original, 58-lesson Ambassador College Correspondence Course says this about azazel: “Ancient Jewish literature knew the Devil by this name. It is, for example, spelled Azalzal and Azael in apocryphal literature” (Lesson 37, p. 4, 1965; emphasis ours).

The updated, 32-lesson edition contains a few more sources (Lesson 29, p. 10, 1986). However, the authors do not use the Bible in their evidence, as the Bible does not identify the live goat as a type of Satan. Instead, the authors quote Arabic tradition that azazel is the name of a demon. They quote a
book entitled *Islam and Its Founder*. They also quote a couple of Protestant theologians on their respective opinions.

The real bombshell, though, is this excerpt:

> Let's notice a modern Jewish commentary that makes it clear that the azazel goat represented Satan the devil: "Azazel . . . was probably a demonic being. . . . Apocryphal Jewish works, composed in the last few centuries before the Christian era, tell of angels who were lured . . . into rebellion against God. In these writings, Azazel is one of the two leaders of the rebellion. And posttalmudic documents tell a similar story about two rebel angels, Uzza and Azzael—both variations of the name Azazel. These mythological stories, which must have been widely known, seem to confirm the essentially demonic character of the old biblical Azazel" (Union of American Hebrew Congregations, *The Torah—a Modern Commentary*, page 859). (Emphasis ours; ellipses theirs).

This last source is a devastating admission. Jewish tradition is used as the final and most important proof, yet its foundation is “apocryphal Jewish works, composed in the last few centuries before the Christian era.” The best-known apocryphal Jewish work from that era is the Book of Enoch.

The Book of Enoch bears the name of one of God’s faithful servants, but what has come down to us as the Book of Enoch was not written by the prophet, but by individuals during the intertestamental period. Scholars estimate that the earlier parts of the book were written around 300 BC at the earliest, while the remainder was written before 100 BC. While containing biblical themes and names, it also includes many things that directly contradict the rest of the biblical canon.

In the Book of Enoch, Azazel is a fallen angel who teaches mankind unrighteous ways. As a result, he is bound and sentenced to the desert forever. It also contains another tradition typically taught on the Day of Atonement—that Satan is the author of human sin: “And the whole earth has been corrupted through the works that were taught by Azazel: *to him ascribe all sin*.’ In other words, the ascribing of all human sin to a fallen angel is from the very same Jewish tradition that identifies the *azazel* as a demon. Yet neither aspect of that tradition is backed up by Scripture.