

ATONEMENT FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT AND AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Atonement is a theological term in most world religions. It is a rite performed to atone, that is, act in a formal way of showing remorse for a wrong done, be it against God, deity or human. Each religion has its various forms and ceremonies associated with rituals of atonement. The Hebrew *yom Kippur* – יוֹם כִּפּוּרִים refers to the Jewish Day of Atonement. It was the day of coverings or propitiations-(Lev.23:27-28). It is rendered in the LXX as **ἡμερα ἐξιλλομου τη ημερα του ἰλομου- Day of Atonement to make atonement for you** (Lev.25:9). It is fully discussed in Leviticus 16. It was the day the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to atone for the sins of the nation Israel. It is significant to note that the annual Day of Atonement is the only fast day prescribed in the Torah as set forth in Leviticus 16. The methodology adopted for this study is historical and textual hermeneutics. It is a textual exegesis of the literary materials on the subject. The study provided a comparative perspective of the Old Testament ritual ceremony and the African Traditional cultural phenomenon, with the objective of evaluation of the fundamental unquantifiable significance of atonement in religious fabric. Its contribution to academic excellence provides scholarly materials for further studies of Theology in Biblical Studies.

KEYWORDS: Atonement, Perspectives, Hatta'th, Scape Goat, Moremi

INTRODUCTION

Atonement from the Old Testament and African Perspectives

Atonement is the making of amends for a wrong or injury. It is a reparation or expiation for sin committed, in order to reconcile man with God. Atonement is used over seventy times in the Old Testament and it is used invariably in a theological concept of זָבַח – sacrifice. Greenberg (1965), Oesterley (1938). According to Paul (1961) it can be viewed from the perspective of the state of, or act of bringing into concord, restoration, or cordial relations and reconciliation.

Etymologically, the Hebrew word for atonement is כִּפּוּר-*Kippūr*, (Davidson. (1980) 390). Its customary meaning is to atone or expiate. In biblical poetry it has מָחָה-*maha*, to atone as parallel synonym. The Revised Standard Version renders it as to “wipe”, to “blot out” (Jer.18:23); הָסִיר-*hēsir*, to “remove” (Isa.27:9). כִּפּוּר is also coupled with טָהַר-*tihar*, to “purify” or “pronounce clean” and הִטָּהַר – *hittā*, to “decontaminate” or “cleanse” (Lev. 14:48, 52-53).

In Nehemiah 4:5, a parallel of כָּסָה-*kissa*, to “cover” is rendered. Philologists claim that etymological *kippūr* is Semitic cognate of the Arabic “cover” and Akkadian “wipe”, both which have a common notion of ‘rub’ from which “wipe” and cover” can be derived.

Atonement therefore can severally connote ‘atone’, expiate, wipe, blow out, remove, purify, pronounce clean, decontaminate, cleanse, cover and rub off. **Ritual Atonement, the Purge.**

Ritual Atonement, the Purge.

כִּפּוּר in the Old Testament is a ritual to purge. It is a technical term in the Pentateuch, Driver (1956). In ritual text *kippēr* is to rub off as illustrated in the purgation offering. Its use is restricted to the sanctuary. Human being was never the object of חַטָּאת-*hatta'th*, purgation offering to rub off or cover or heal the leper or consecrate the priest. The Human is only the beneficiary of the *kippēr*. It is significant to note that the *hatta'th* blood could not purge the worshiper of his committed sin but to purge the sanctuary (Lev.16:14-19), the most sacred, contaminated by the physical impurity or inadvertent misdemeanor against Yahweh (Lev. 12-15; 16:14-19). According to Numbers 15:30-31, presumptuous sins and impurities of the sinner could not be purged by the *hatta'th* of the human. It is at the annual ritual during the *kippēr* that purgation is for both the sanctuary and the nation. In further hermeneutics of *kippēr*, in the context of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament, it is a technical term in the Pentateuch. The expiatory sacrifices deal only with offences committed against the deity. Wrongs against humans are not the focus of the Day of Atonement – *Yom hakkippurim* יוֹם הַכִּיפּוּרִים, the annual 'day of purgation' is for the temple and the people.

The above deduction shows that whatever sin committed by the human is a miasma that attracted magnetic pollution of the sanctuary. In the ordinary slogan, any sin committed against once neighbour is committed against God, hence the sanctuary of Yahweh is massively polluted by human sins. In the light of the above Israel had to purge the sanctuary annually through the indispensable medium of the priesthood for purity, so that Yahweh would not abandon the sacred abode.

The Ancient Near East traditionally had obsession with temple purification and this was a tradition shared by ancient Israel as the theology of *kippēr* is concerned. The argument that the *kippēr* rite is not inherently efficacious because the human is not its direct object, does not contradict its bearing of all the features of Israelite monotheism. Israel however believed that the physical and moral impurity of the human could pollute the sanctuary and drive God out of it.

Ritual Atonement - כִּפּוּר as כִּסָּה: Kissah-Cover

According to Milgrom (1970) *kippēr* may be conceived in the sense of "rub on" in the Israelite cult. The paschal blood put on the doorposts signified protection of the house and its inhabitants (Exod. 12:27; Isa.31:31:5). This was a common practice in Babylonian rituals when blood was smeared on door to obstruct any evil from entering the house. Another instance is the double blood rite for the purged altar (Lev.16:18; 20) where the term *kippēr* occurs, to stop a plague. Butrich. (1980).

Kippēr as Ransome or Substitute

The phenomenon of the ransom/substitute is evident in the Mesopotamian magic of *kupirtu or takpiru* absorbed by a medium, thrown or carried away. It led to substance of evil transferred and thereupon eliminated. In the case of the scrape goat the above phenomenon is represented in the Bible.

The above *kippēr* is sharply distinguished from that of the sanctuary, in which the impurities are purged to keep them from causing the indwelling Yahweh to vacate the sanctuary. The *kippēr* as ransom or substitute has the objective of preventing the divine anger from incinerating the human, De Vaux (1964) 91-112.

kippēr is from *kopher* (Davidson, (1980) 389. It means 'ransom' (Ex. 21:30). All texts which assign to *kippēr* the function of averting wrath would possibly have *Kopher* in context. However, no substitute was allowed for a deliberate murder but accidental homicide may be ransomed (Num. 1:53; 8:19; 18:22-23).

***Kippēr* as Expiate**

The evolution of the root *kippēr* produces the notion to expiate, to eliminate dangerous impurity by rubbing off as a ransom/substitute or expiation in general. Therefore the function of the *kippēr* in sacrifice whose blood is not daubed on the altar but its side, is to expiate sin according to the ‘*ola-* אֹלָהּ- (burnt offering - (Lev.1:4) and *minha* (meat offering -Lev. 14:20). The *Kapporeth* – ‘mercy seat’ or ‘cover’ on the tabernacle ark (Ex.25.17-22), a feminine abstract noun from the verb *kippēr*, it perhaps means ‘that which expiates’. It is conceived as the source of expiation (Num. 7. 89).

Ritual Atonement without *Kippēr*

According to *Milgrom* (1976) 80, to sacrifice as purification ritual for physical impurity may be a *hatta’th*, *purgation* for the purpose to purge the contaminated sanctuary. The term ‘atonement’ is not significant here for the individual, all he needs is to be cleansed for which the rite of ablution is sufficient. For moral purification, the term *kippēr* is not used (Isa. 1:16; Ezek. 36:23, Zech. 13:1; Ps. 51:27). Repentance in the non-ritual texts of the Bible is the main requirement for atonement for moral evils. This however does not rule out the indispensability of repentance in the ritual texts as well. But the unrepented sinner does not enjoy sacrificial atonement because he has reviled the Lord (Num 15:30). His repentance must be supplemented by confession (Lev.5:5; Num.5:7 of Lev.16:21; 26:40). Repentance must also lead to rectification of the wrong doing (Isa. 1:13-17; 58: 6-12; Mk 6:6-8).

Nonritual *Kippēr*

In ritual *kippēr* the subject is the priest and the direct object is a contaminated thing, whereas, in the nonritual the subject is the deity and the direct object is sin (Jer. 18:23; Ezek. 16:63; Ps.78:38). Though the priest performs the rituals and God makes the ritual efficacious, the nonritual exhortations require no priestly mediation but turn to God the sole dispenser of expiation. If rituals stipulate repentance as a precondition for atonement, moral exhortation is required upon repentance, Keith (1976). It is obvious in the Old Testament that the consciousness and absolution of sin were moral realities according to Exodus 34:7; 1 Samuel 15:25; Hosea 14:2 and Micah 7:18.

Because of the holiness of the sanctuary, the land of Israel is complemented as the holy land, though it is capable of defilement such as sexual immorality and murder (Lev. 18:25,28; Num.35:33-34; Ezek. 36:17; Deut. 21:23). As the sanctuary needs *kippēr*, so also the land does (Num.35:33), to avoid destruction (Lev.18:28; 20:22).

Atonement for the land became more significant in post biblical Judaism. The Old Testament theology provides for intercession in the doctrine of atonement that God would spare the land by the virtue of the merit of the just therein. These are evident in the intervention of Abraham for Sodom and Gomorrah, and Moses intercession for the worshippers of the golden calf (Gen. 18:16-33; Exod. 32:11ff; Ps. 106: 23). Significantly, the Prophet Ezekiel held a contrary view to the above as he vehemently declared that the righteous would not save the land, but that each person would be judged according to his sin.

Day of Atonement

According to Abe (2004), the Institution of the Day of Atonement was the climax of sacrificial system in the Old Testament. Its object is clearly stated in Leviticus 16: 33 that the priest

Shall make atonement for the sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for the people of the assembly.

The great atonement became an annual congregational cultus of burnt and sin offerings for an assured renewal of right relationship with Yahweh.

The Hebrew יוֹם הַכִּיפּוּרִים – *yom hakkippurim* Buchler (1976) is the Day of the Atonement, the annual ‘day of purgation’ for the temple and the people.). It was the great annual fast day of Judaism, celebrated in the tenth day of the month *Tishri or Eth’anim* which was first of civil year seed time, equivalent of modern September-October (Abe, 1983). The sacrifice of purgation offerings–*hatta’ah* was offered on the day as sin offering of atonement (Exod. 30:10; Num. 29 29:11). Three *hatta’th* animals are offered on behalf of the priesthood and the people (Lev. 16:5, 6, 11, 15). All goats were sacrificed as atonement for the pollution of the temple and its sanctums through wantonness and other transgressions according to the Torah. The blood of the scape goat spilled within the shine makes the Atonement. The live *hatta’th* dispatched to AZAZEL (Lev. 16:26) was to purged the people of their sins and the shrine of the physical pollution as the scapegoat carried off their iniquities (Lev.16:16, 19, 22) to the nether world.

The temple must be purged of its defilement, to avoid the contamination of the holy altar; hence the entire temple complex must be purged and consecrated on the Day of Atonement. The Ancient Near East is noted for its religious fervour. They believed that impurity possessed demonic power. Impurity was bound to threaten the temple and also the deities therein. Israel in the same vein was tenaciously cleaved to temple purification. Israel believed that by the effect of the he goat banished to Azazel, evil was banished to its place of origin, the wilderness.

The pagan purgation expulsion nexus survived in Israelite cult with a theological revolution. The Azazel rites on the Day of Atonement were unique. The slain *hatta’th* purged the tabernacle, but the live *hatta’th* carried off the people’s sins for their purification and their camp. (Lev. 11:44; 19:2, 20:26; Num.5:3; Deut.21:1-). For effective purification the offerer must lay his hand upon the object and confess his sins, it is repentance that purges the man as the *hatta’th* blood purges the sanctuary. It is significant to emphasize that the atonement by sacrifice was efficacious only for sin committed against Yahweh, but non effective for the sins between man and his neighbours. To be effective, he must appease his neighbour by making restitution to his fellow before sacrificial expiation (Lev. 6:1-7).

The Scape Goat

Azazel etymologically is uncertain. The term has a variety of meanings from time to time. When connected with the scape goat it may connote an entire removal from inhabitant world (Isa. 13:21; Job. 8:3; Bar.4:35). In Enoch 6:7; 8:1 Azazel was the term for Satan, the chief of the fallen angels. The sacrificial rite of the scape goat during the Atonement was to remove the guilt upon the people, while the sacrifices of the bull and the goat, (whose blood was held to be potent per se, though no magical power was attributed to the blood) were for the removal of the pollution of cult by Israel. Synonymously as it were in ancient Hittite, a woman and a goat of multicoloured wool were driven through the camp towards the camp of the enemy as a sacrifice to their god to remove the plague brought upon them. According to Abe (2004) it is another idea of substitution, or satisfaction *vicaria* in the vicarious, holy, perfect and satisfactory suffering of the servant of the Lord. This concept has a profound application in the Old Testament theology of the Suffering Servant (Isa. 53; 6, 11-12).

The high priest put on his magnificent cloth of gold costume and confessed sins on behalf of the people and laid hands on the he goat and handed it over to an appointed man to lead it away into the wilderness. The people also participated in the act of departure of the he goat. They pulled out its wool, pricked it, spat on it and urged it to depart through the route to the wilderness where it would die with the effect that the people had been cleansed of their sins (Isa.1:18). This phenomenon was a replica of Isaiah 53:4-9, the vicarious sacrifice of Christ, the Jehovah’s suffering

servant, the Atonement lamb of Yahweh. When the High Priest had completed the great burnt offering of the Atonement, he would change to the sacred white garments to enable him enter the Holy of Holies to complete the sacrificial rites. According to Psalm 103:12, the people believed that by this great cultus act, their transgressions had been removed as far as the east is from the west. The Day of Atonement which was originally an ancient ritual for the purging of the sanctuary was significantly restructured. It became a tremendous national renewal of citizenship wholly belonging to Yahweh. It was a day of the reenactment of the covenant relationship. It was the greatest of the festivals when Satan was symbolically subdued and Yahweh triumphed. It was the most solemn expression of Jewish faith in Yahweh and his worship.

The African Perspective of Atonement

The concept and practice of atonement are universal. There is no religion that disregards its efficacy to wipe off sins committed by people be it against their deities or humans. Atonement is characteristically performed with sacrifices and shed of blood.

Be it legend or actual history, there was a story of Queen Moremi of Ile-Ife, wife of King Orangun and mother of Ela, her only begotten son, Johnson (2007), (Moremi Ajasoro, Wikipedia). Moremi was described as a beautiful and virtuous Princess. Ile-Ife was described as one of the ancient Yoruba nations which was raided by the forest tribe called Igbo. The constant terrifying raids of the aliens were adjudged as divine punishment by the gods of the land for unidentified evils already committed by the Ife people. Ife believed that the raiders were not ordinary people as they emerged on battlefield as spirits in weird postures similar to masquerades. Despite series of sacrifices offered by the Ife, the unrest perpetrated by the foreign insurgents continued to escalate, thereby throwing the land into a state of confusion.

It was in this state of national panic of Ife country that Queen Moremi became a heroine. She surreptitiously sneaked herself into the captivity of the raiders. This she did with a desire to get to the secret of the insurgents, so that she could change the destiny of her nation. To succeed of her desire she sought for spiritual assistance of the god of the land. She vowed before the goddess of a stream to offer unprecedented sacrifice or the richest sacrifice she could offer <http://Moremifile&ife> & Ns.org.mozillat.en to the goddess if her endeavour succeeded.

Indeed she was captured as orchestrated and taken a prisoner to the capital of the Igbo land and was handed over to their king as a great booty of the raid. There she learnt quietly and secretly all the tricks of the spirits who were raiding her land. Uncannily, she was intelligent and of noble heart and won the respect of both the king and his subjects. She was exposed to all the secrets of the age long enemies of her land unsuspectingly. She got to know that the Igbo warriors disguised themselves as spirits by putting up mantles of dry grass and bamboo fibre which made them strange and unnatural phenomena. She also learnt that they dared not go near fire not to be consumed. If Ife could therefore challenge them with lighted touches or fire, they would be summarily defeated. Having secured the means of victory over the Igbos, she cleverly eluded from the palace and escaped back home. She was welcomed back home and restated as queen. As planned and executed, the spirits were completely defeated and subdued.

In order to ensure the permanent subdue of the age long enemies, Moremi had to pay her vow before the goddess. She made robust sacrifices of fowls, sheep, bullocks and other valuables (THY, 148), but all were rejected by the goddess as not unprecedented. The oracles revealed to her that the goddess demanded her only begotten son called Ela. This demand was non-negotiable. Hence she unwillingly sacrificed her only son to the goddess. It was a divine sacrifice of atonement. Ela became the live *hatta'th* of the Day of Atonement dispatched to Azazel (Lev. 16:20-26). In the concept of African theology, blood sacrifice is also the greatest sacrifice in African culture. Great events required great sacrifice

which usually required shed of human blood and nothing else. Such events included construction of city walls for defense and security, laying of foundation stone of the palace and before commencement of civil war against the nation's enemies. All these practices were atonement to appease the gods of the land in order to secure the favour of the gods for victory of the land. Such atonement would remedy any evil that the land might have committed against the gods and goddesses; or any grievous abomination that any individual like the case of Achan in Ai (Josh. 7:18-26) might have committed. In this case, the African perspectives of atonement are principally akin to the Old Testament ritual *Kippēr* to purge the sanctuary, the abode of Yahweh. However, human was never the object of the Kipper, as it were the common tradition of the ancient peoples in the Old Testament period. Because of the sacredness of human life as vital characteristics of the Mosaic Law, the Old Testament, Atonement did not require shed of human blood (Abe, 116). Moremi ritual sacrifice of her son was a sacrifice for Ife land. The emergence of the day of the sacrifice became a memorable epic in Ife history. Rather than jubilation for their victory over the notorious age long terrors, they wore sad mood as they wept bitterly over the sad episode. In compensation for her sacrifice the Ifes declared themselves as sons and daughters of Queen Moremi. (Atanda (2007) 28-30. Thus Moremi became a figure of high significance in the history of the Yoruba Peoples of West Africa (WFE).

Boko Haram Insurgency

Terrorism is a word that bestrides Nigeria like a colossus. Boko Haram is an Islamist sect that has made Nigeria a victim of an undeclared war. It has put Nigeria under siege of attack since 2009 in its phenomena of car bombs, suicide bombs, indiscriminate bombing of selected targets, kidnapping, assassinations and abduction of people. Thousands of lives have been eliminated in over a hundred attacks with the objective to challenge the sovereignty and integrity of Nigeria, and create insecurity and anarchism. There is no safety any where both at home and at work. The sect's heinous and violent crimes are committed freely at strategic places, motor parks, homes, airports, bus stops, on the streets, sacred and hallowed sanctuaries of worship centers be it church and mosque are equally targets of the terrorists.

For about four months now, the about 270 girls who were abducted by the terrorists from their secondary school in Chibok, Borno state on April 15, 2014 are yet to be rescued; though a few of them, 50 miraculously escaped. But the where about of the rest, who are still in the captivity of the terrorists, is still a riddle for which no solution is forth coming. The terrorists has seized considerable parts of the Borno, Yobe and Nasarawa states in Northeast of Nigeria which includes Bama, Banki, Marte, Ngala, Kala Balge, Dikwa, Gwoza (The Nation, Wednesday 3 & Thursday 4, September, 2014-1,4, 69) and has installed an Islamic Caliphate hovering their flag there. Up till now the Nigerian troops has not been able to repel the insurgents. Some of the grieved parents of the abducted girls have lost confidence in the willingness and ability of the Nigerian government to release their children from the captors. They painfully challenged the federal government to flush out the devils from their dens even if requires the elimination of their children, whose safety of lives they were pessimistic about. They lamented that a stop should be put to their trauma, even if it would require the burial of their children!

The federal government has been accused of lost of moral right to negotiate with the insurgents to free the innocent students from their abduction and incarceration by the Boko Haram terrorists. Some socio-political analysts had postulated that the Federal Government is indirectly making the Chibok students a "scape-goat" as Atonement for the unquantifiable sins of Nigeria. The government is accused of its levity with which it handles the heart breaking barbaric, dastardly and wicked act of the inhuman jihadists.

Whether this religious concept will fit in to salvage the astonishing corruption and ill conceived nation like Nigeria is a mirage. Boko Haram menace is becoming insurmountable as the suzerain one over the vassal, Nigeria. Certainly the abducted students if not released by the insurgents may become socio-political scape-goats. But the just and effective Atonement for the Nigerian socio-political and religious woes is not the Chibok girls. It is for the citizens to be liberated and rescued from satanic enslavement, featured in unquantified corruption, terrible governess and worthless followership, greediness, laziness, selfishness, inhumanness and such like evils parading the entire nation.

CONCLUSIONS

The sacrifice of Ela was a replica of the Old Testament sacrifice of purgation offerings- *hatta'ah* offered at *yom hakkippurim*, the Day of Atonement. It also resembles the sacrifice of the daughter and only child of Jephthah (Judg.11:30-40). Jephthah had vowed to offer unto Yahweh whatsoever came forth of the doors of his house to meet him on his return from the victory over the Ammonites that fought against Israel at that time. Like the daughter voluntarily submitted herself to her father to be offered as vowed, Ela similarly submitted herself voluntarily to her mother to pay her vow of the unprecedented sacrifice to the stream goddess. Both episodes were atonement sacrifices of *hatta'th* of *yom hakkippurim*. But contrary to the above, the Chibok girls should not be sacrificed as scape-goats for the sins of their nation, Nigeria. Alas, the girls did not voluntarily submit themselves to their abductors.

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