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## **Atonement and the Paradox of Peace and Violence in Numbers 25:6-13: An Expository Overview**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Ojebode is correct when he posits that ‘the goal of every religion is man’s universal thirst for truth, peace and goodness.’<sup>1</sup> Man achieves this goal through many ways which he expresses his beliefs and attitudes. No matter where or how man developed from the time he became man, his irresistible urge to worship has created and will continue to create endless forms of religious behavior. This urge is so powerful in man that it has produced a Mosaic kind of belief, attitude and practice. Religion is generally defined as the belief in the existence of a supernatural ruling power who is the creator and controller of the universe which can be understood in terms of beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and religious ministers.<sup>2</sup> A. W. Tozer asserts that “what we believe about God is the most important thing about us”<sup>3</sup> either formally or informal, every adherent of the Christian faith is a theologian because Christianity as a religious phenomenon which correlates with the understanding

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<sup>1</sup> P. A. Ojebode & B. B. Ajayi, *Introduction to the Study of Religions* (Oyo: Omo-Oje Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rufus Okikiolaolu Olubiyi Oshitelu, *African Instituted Churches: Diversities, Growth, Gifts, Spirituality and Ecumenical Understanding of African Instituted Churches* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2002 ), 13-14

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Paul E. Little, *Know What You Believe* (London: Scripture Union, 1973) cf. James O. Adeyanju ‘Preface’ in *Theology One Book: Theology Book Series* (Ilorin: Amazing-Grace Print-media, 2017), vi.

of religious beliefs and practices with a concept of divine,<sup>4</sup> demands much explanation (cf. I Pet. 3: 15b). There is a growing awareness of this prodigy<sup>5</sup> and the modern scientific worldview which is becoming universal is making a rational affirmation of religious belief difficult. One of the contemporary concepts of religion generating scholarship attention in 21<sup>st</sup> century is the idea of atonement. This article is borne out of genuine concern in order to unravel the knot about what was obtainable between the Jews in Old Testament and the paradox of peace in line with the concept of atonement.

## **THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ATONEMENT**

“Atonement.” by its derivation describes the setting “at one” or reconciliation of two parties who have been estranged”.<sup>6</sup> Etymologically, the word ‘atonement’ signifies a harmonious relationship or that which brings about such relationship. The necessity for such is the breach in the primal relationship between the creator and the creature occasioned by man’s sinful rebellious action according to the biblical record of the fall of man found in Genesis. The fundamental idea of this frequently employed Hebrew word for atonement ‘*koper*’ seems to mean ‘to cover’ or ‘to wipe away’. This is used to describe the effect of the sacrifice at the consecration of the high priest and the altar, and of the annual sacrifice for the renewal of the consecration of the priest’ people, and the tabernacle.

Atonement and sacrifice go hand-in-hand in the Bible. The Old Testament sacrifice is known as *korban*, from the Hebrew root *karov* meaning ‘to come close to God’.<sup>7</sup> Sacrifice in the Old Testament was a means by which man was enabled to approach

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<sup>4</sup> Christ Gousmett, *Introduction to Christian Worldview: A Course of Thinking Christianly about the whole of Life* (London: Chris Gousmett, 1996), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Deji Isaac Ayegboyin & S. Ademola Ishola, ‘Preface’ *African Indigenous Churches* (Lagos: Greater Heights Publications, 2013), x.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *The Free Encyclopedia Volume 1* (USA: Childcraft International Incorporated, 1981), 118.

<sup>7</sup> [www.jewfaq.org/qorbanot.html](http://www.jewfaq.org/qorbanot.html) 26 January 2017.

God for atonement. Sacrifice and atonement form the core of Old Testament cults. The Levitical priestly system contained all five different kinds of offering: the burnt offering, cereal offering, guilt offering, sin offering and peace offering. Each had its peculiar purpose and was intended to facilitate man to a relationship with God.<sup>8</sup>

## **ATONEMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Atonement, a word coined by the sixteen-century reformer and Bible translator, William Tyndale, describes the solution to the offence towards God caused by human sin.<sup>9</sup> It signifies the reconciliation and restoration between God and man provided by Christ's death. The entire message of salvation comes close to being encapsulated in this one word. Atonement is the aspect of the work of Jesus and particularly His death that makes possible the restoration of fellowship between individual believers and God.<sup>10</sup> Atonement is the theological way of describing what a secular historian would merely call crucifixion. There were many crucifixions in the ancient Roman world, but only one of them was atonement – when Jesus by His death made up for the sins of the whole world.<sup>11</sup>

Christian theology has always understood atonement as the reparation of an offence or injury<sup>12</sup> as it applies to the relationship between God and man. We offend God, and Christ

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: Inter varsity, 1981), 432.

<sup>9</sup> William Tyndale, "The Atonement and The Purpose of God" in Gabriel N. Flurer (ed.), *Atonement* (USA: Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, 2010), 145.

<sup>10</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Constitution and Bye laws of the Evangelical Church of West Africa* (Jos: Challenge Press, 2002), 12. Cf. Daniel, Mary Taiye, 'A Study of Sin, Salvation, and The Doctrine of Eternal Security in Evangelical Church Winning All'. Ph.D Thesis Submitted to Department of Religion, University of Ilorin, 2013), 238.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 239.

<sup>12</sup> Merriam Webster, "Atonement" in *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/atonement> December 20, 2016.

makes reparation for our offence. Christians understand that God graciously has provided a way to be right with him only by means of atonement that Jesus Christ made on a Roman cross nearly thousand years ago.

The expression ‘make atonement’ is frequent in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, but rare in the rest of the Bible. The basic idea, however, is widespread. The need for atonement arrives from the sinfulness of humankind,<sup>13</sup> a truth made plain throughout scripture yet infrequent outside the Bible. The discourse about sin plays a prominent role in Christendom than anywhere else. It is preached and taught because it is one of the fundamental teachings of the scripture. It is indeed the central stage. Grudem opines that “sin is any failure to conform to the mind law of God, in acts, attitude or nature”<sup>14</sup>.

In the Old Testament, sin is dealt with by offering sacrifice. Thus, the burnt offering will be accepted “to make atonement” (Leviticus 1: 4), as also the sin offering and the guilt offering (4: 20; 7: 7) and especially the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (7: 16). Sacrifice is ineffective if offered in the wrong spirit. To sin “with a high hand” (Numbers 15: 30), that is, proudly and presumptuously, is to place oneself outside the sphere of God’s forgiveness. Many times, the prophet denounced the offering of sacrifice as merely external action. But to offer sacrifice as the expression of a repentant and trustful heart is to find atonement. Atonement is sometimes made apart from sacrifice – by paying money (Exodus 30: 12 – 16) or offering life (2 Samuel 21: 3 – 6). In such cases, to make atonement means “to avert punishment, especially the divine anger, by the payment of a

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<sup>13</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ‘Atonement’ in David Horton (Gen.e.) *The Portable Seminary* (USA: Bethany House Publishers, 2006), 134.

<sup>14</sup> Wagne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 480.

*koper*, a ransom, which may be of money, or which may be of life”.<sup>15</sup>

*Koper* is a noun which refers to a ransom price. Illustratively, a farmer has an ill-tempered ox, and the ox gets free one day, wanders down to the neighbor’s farm, and kills one of the neighbor’s servant. At least, this is a crime of negligence. Under the Israeli law, if this happened, and it could be proven that the farmer is at fault, it is conceivable (and this is exercising the fullest measure of punishment) the farmer would have to forfeit his life on behalf of the life that was taken. However, there was an arrangement under Hebrew law that allowed the farmer who owned the animal to redeem either himself or the animal by the payment of a *koper* if he could make an arrangement with the relative of the man who has been killed.<sup>16</sup> In other words, it was a settlement that allowed the guilty party to avoid the full extent of the law by providing an amount of money that would satisfy the wronged party for the loss sustained.

For atonement to be attained in the Old Testament, there is a need to conduct sacrifices. Different sacrifices are made for the attainment of atonement for different kinds of sin. Sacrifice is needed to seek more favour and to attain victory over evil and danger. It is also a means to gain more blessing from Yahweh (Mal. 3:10).

Fundamental to Jewish worldview was the understanding that Yahweh is the source of everything. According to Bratcher, the Israelites lived in a culture dominated by Canaanite Baal worship. The religion of the Canaan, like most Ancient Near East, revolved around the cycles of the natural world and personified those processes into gods. There were gods for virtually everything – rain, crops, death, etc. They had to be

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<sup>15</sup> L. L. Morris, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Wheaton: Tyndale Publishers, 1965), 166.

<sup>16</sup> James M. Boice, “The Language of the Marketplace” in Gabriel N. E. Fluhrer (Gen. E.) *Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, 2010), 89.

constantly appeased and made happy with sacrifices to bring order into the uncertainty of human life.<sup>17</sup>

Israel is perhaps the only nation known in ancient world to have championed Nigeria. Yahweh was the only one true, great and holy God.<sup>18</sup> By implication, all sacrifices made in the course of their ceremonial engagements were directed to Yahweh. Sacrifices were attached to one form of ceremony or the other. According to Abe, festivals and sacrifices were prominent features of the Hebrew religion. It was necessary in order to maintain and renew constantly, the corporal bond between God and the people.<sup>19</sup>

Sacrifices were either bloody (animals) or bloodless (grain and wine). The bloody sacrifices were divided into holocaust (burnt offering, in which the whole of the animal is burnt), guilty offering (in which part was burnt and part left for the priests) and peace offering (in which similarly only part of the animal was burnt).<sup>20</sup>

*Olah* (burnt offering) – ‘that which goes up’, in which the whole animal is offered on the altar. Burnt offering is the best known sacrifice. It is the oldest and commonest sacrifice and represented submission to God’s will. An *Olah* was completely burnt on the outer altar; no part of it was eaten by anyone.<sup>21</sup>

*Zebah* (thank offering) – ‘that which is slain’ in which only a portion of it is given to God and the rest eaten by the sacrificial guests. Thanks offering was an offering expressing thanks or gratitude to God for his bounties and mercies. This category of

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<sup>17</sup> Bratcher, “Old Testament Sacrifice Magic or Sacrament?”

<http://www.civouiuce.org/sacrifice.html>. (Accessed 11 February, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> G. O. Abe, *The Religion of the Exile* (Lagos: New Dawn International, 2005) 67.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>20</sup> A. J. Adedokun, “The concept of Sacrifice in Johannine Theology and the Interpretation of Jesus as the Lamb of God among Yoruba Christians” in *African Journal of Biblical Studies* (Vol. 3, No. 3, 1989)143.

<sup>21</sup> [www.jewfaq.org/qorbanot.html](http://www.jewfaq.org/qorbanot.html) 26 February 2016.

offerings that included freewill offerings, and offerings made after fulfillment of a vow.<sup>22</sup>

A sin offering is an offering to atone for and purge a sin. It is an expression of sorrow for the error and a desire to be reconciled with God. The Hebrew term for this type of offering is *chatta't*, from the word *chayt*, meaning 'missing the mark'. A *chatta't* could only be offered for sin committed unintentionally and not for sins that have to do with stealing things from the altar, or when one is not sure whether one has committed a sin or does not know the sin one has committed, or for a breach of trust.<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew word for a guilt offering is *asham*. Where there was a doubt as to whether a person committed a sin, the person would make an *asham* rather than *chatta*. Both sin and guilt offerings, serve the purpose of atonement and restoration of broken relationship with God.

These guilt and sin offerings, have their original concepts in that they were not supposed to be sacrifices per se, but more exactly, to render the original meaning of the words they were fines and in fact money fines.<sup>24</sup> Though ritual sacrifice was practised in Ancient Israel, with the opening chapters of the book of Leviticus detailing the exact method of bringing sacrifices, the beginnings of sacrifice are found in the primitive ages of man and among all the nations of antiquity.<sup>25</sup> Sacrifice appeared on the scene first in life when man became utterly ruthless to God in the Garden of Eden. God according to His eternal authority initiated the act of killing an animal as to make garment from the skin for Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21). From this, it can be deduced that God is the originator of sacrifice.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> J. B. Jevons, *Introduction to the History of Israelites Sacrifice* (London: Praeger Publisher, 1896), 98.

<sup>24</sup>G. L. Lasebikan 'Sacrifice in the Old Testament' in *Orita Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* XX/2 December (1988), 67.

<sup>25</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel Volume: Religious Institution*, 445.

This innuendo about man's life is demanding for a spiritual re-balance before God. He, therefore, needs a savior. This brought about the initial initiative to cover man from his nakedness, and this was done by killing (sacrificing) an animal to provide humanity skin covering. All mankind were in Adam participating in his sin and bearing the resultant guilt (Rom. 5:12), this sacrifice was a sentence of retardation of the lost intimacy between man and God.

Cain and Abel's biographies stressed their act of worship through an offering. Cain and Abel offered sacrifice to God (Gen. 4:3-4) – Cain “of fruits of the ground” and Abel “of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portion.” Abel sufficed in the sight of God in his sacrifice, but Cain's offering was debilitated (Gen. 4: 3-5), in line with God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice. This suggested animal sacrifice as a continued standard. Upon disembarking from the ark after the great flood, Noah immediately built and offered burnt sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> “Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took every bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar” (Gen. 8:20).

During the Patriarch age, at the time of sacrifice, the Patriarchs dwelled solely on the name of God at the altar made (Gen. 8:20), and the Patriarchs were in the habit of building altars and offering sacrifices on them, calling upon God at the places He had revealed Himself to them (Gen. 12:7; 13:4; 26:25; 31:54; 33:20; 35:7). Indeed, to sacrifice seems as natural to man as to pray; the one indicates what he feels about himself, the other what he feels about God. The one means a felt need of propitiation, the other a felt sense of dependence.<sup>27</sup> The loudest sacrifice of all during the Patriarch age was that of Abraham who was told to sacrifice Isaac. Of course, it was the greatest tempting hours for him but with his faith in God demonstrated

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<sup>26</sup> Scott Langston & E. Ray Clendenen “Sacrifice and Offering” in Chad Brand & et, al. (ed.) *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1429.

<sup>27</sup> Merrill F. Unger, “Sacrifice” in *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962) 1099.



through his obedience to God's mandate for him, God substituted the boy, Isaac with a ram.

According to Derek Williams' study of historical development, many nations besides Israel, practiced sacrifices (Jug. 16:32, I Sam. 6:4 II Kings. 3:27). The records of ancient Ugarit clearly indicate developed sacrifices bearing similar names to those of the Old Testament.<sup>28</sup> With the Hebrew as with the rest of the ancient world, sacrifice constituted the main part of worship.<sup>29</sup> Hence, sacrifice was not confined to Israel among the nations of antiquity and many parallels from surrounding nations have been adduced in explanations. It is interesting to note however that McKenzie affirms that; "not much is known of sacrificial rituals of Mesopotamia and Canaan,"<sup>30</sup> but then goes on to assert that, "what is known suggests that the sacrificial act of ritual of these areas was in many aspects like the sacrificial act of Israelites."<sup>31</sup> This statement appears to be contradictory. The fact is that he did not seem to give himself to the study, for quite a lot has been done by way of study of the Canaanite and Mesopotamian sacrificial rites.

De Vaux<sup>32</sup> has concluded that the rites used in Israelites sacrifice were of ancient origin. He goes on to analytically explain sacrifice in Mesopotamia, Arabia and Canaan, concluding that while, "there may be some tenuous and secondary contacts between the sacrificial system followed in Israel and that followed in Babylonia. The two systems are very

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<sup>28</sup> Derek Williams, *New Concise Bible Direction A-Z* (England: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 458.

<sup>29</sup> J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to History of Ancient Israel*, 52.

<sup>30</sup> John McKenzie, "Sacrifice" in *Dictionary of the Bible* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 754.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its life and Institution* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1976), 433.

different from each other and certainly independent of each other.”<sup>33</sup>

Rowley’s conception agrees with De Vaux when the former asserts that Israel had already possessed its own idea and sacrificial rites before coming in contact with Canaan and simply adapted Canaanite rites to its own.<sup>34</sup> This may suggest that the origin of its sacrificial rites lay in the wilderness, perhaps with the Patriarchs. It can be concluded safely that the historical development of sacrifice in Israel is due to the universal prevalence of sacrifice among the Oriental nations, particularly the Semitic peoples, of which Israel is part.

After the Exodus events, the chief sacrifices were those associated with three great festivals. Other sacrifices for individuals and national needs were for dedication (I Sam. 6:14) and celebration (I Sam. 1:3). When Solomon built the temple, it marked the time when worship and sacrifices became more centralized. The prophets reacted against abuses and pagan elements brought into the cult (examples: Isa. 1:1 ff, Amos 4:4 ff). But Ezekiel looked ahead to a purified, centralized worship in the future (Ezek. 40-48), after the exile, the temple and cult of sacrifice were reinstated and were valued of sincere worship (Mal. 1:6ff).

Conclusively, sacrifice in the Old Testament came about as a result of the fall of man, which brought a consciousness of sin, condemnation and separation from God. This action of man caused separation from God which attracts grave consequences in reconciling with God was the inevitable, which is sacrifice. God’s demonstration of his loving and concern for man, made Him to make the initial provision of sacrifice by shedding the blood of an animal in order to clothe Adam and Eve with the skin. The covering of their nakedness with the skin of the

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 435.

<sup>34</sup> H. H. Rowley, “The Meaning of Sacrifice in the Old Testament” in *Bulleting of John Rylands’ Library* XXXIII, (1950/1), 78.

animal whose life has been pulled off (sacrifice), established the love of God and His intention to bring back man to His fellowship.

It is observed that man's sin could not be covered by their own efforts (Gen. 3:7). This revealed why God shed the blood of an animal and used its skin to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve. It is also an attempt to renew the contact between man and God so that, the fellowship lost can be regained. It is further an attempt to sustain the communion with God. This is the sacrifice found in Exodus which is the meal of the Passover; the purpose was to become more united with God.

### **YOM KIPPU (DAY OF ATONEMENT)**

The religion of the Hebrews required them to offer different types of sacrifices to Yahweh. Blood sacrifice was foremost in the required sacrifice especially when it had to do with the remission of sin. At the peak of their sacrificial worship is *Yom Kippu*.<sup>35</sup> Literally, *Yom Kippu* means Day of Atonement. The Hebrew *Yom Kippu* refers to the Jewish Day of Atonement.<sup>36</sup> Buchler refers to the Day of Atonement as the annual day of purgation for the temple and the people.<sup>37</sup>

It was the great annual fast day of Judaism, celebrated in the tenth day of the month *Tishri* which was first of civil year seed time, equivalent of modern September – October.<sup>38</sup> The institution of the Day of Atonement was the climax of the sacrificial system of Old Testament. The great atonement became annual congregation cults of burnt and sin offerings for

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<sup>35</sup> Luka Turaki Zazzaga, *Power in the Blood of Jesus Christ: The Biblical Perspective* (Niger: Kenbis Printers, 2014), 60.

<sup>36</sup> G. O. Abe, "Atonement from the Old Testament and African Perspective" A Paper Presentation at the 27<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), 1.

<sup>37</sup> A. Buchler 'Studies in Sin and Atonement' in *The International Dictionary of the Bible Vol. 4* (Abingdon: Nashville Press, 1976), 369.

<sup>38</sup> G. O. Abe, *The Theology of Covenant in the Old Testament* (Ibadan: John Archers Publishers, 1983), 449.

an assured renewal of right relationship with Yahweh.<sup>39</sup> Its objective is clearly stated in Leviticus 16:32 that the priest:

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

The Day of Atonement started during their wilderness worship journey according to the command of Yahweh. It became another significant ceremony that was celebrated in Israel which typified Jesus. The Day of Atonement is a day of covering. R.B Thieme gives us the understanding that the Greek word for propitiation, *hilasterion*, and the Hebrew word *Kapporeth*, both mean “mercy seat”. They refer to the wooden box called the Ark of the Covenant, which was overlaid with gold and stood in the Holy of Holies.<sup>40</sup> The verbal forms of the word atonement appear approximately 100 times in the Hebrew Bible. The theological meaning of the term is “to cover over” often with the blood of sacrifice in order to make atonement for some sin.<sup>41</sup>

Leviticus 16 gives us the account of the institution of the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement was celebrated in humility and through self-denial and abstinence from defilement by all Israelites that were of age. On that day, two goats were set apart. One of the goats was to be offered by the high priest and its blood was taken to the Holy of Holies for sprinkling on the mercy seat while the meat of the goat is to be burned as burnt sacrifice. On the other hand, the second goat was to be sent to the desert after the sin of the whole nation has been confessed

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<sup>39</sup> G. O. Abe, *History and Theology of Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Benin: Seevon Prints, 2004), 93.

<sup>40</sup> R. B. Thieme Jr, *The Blood of Christ* (Houston: R. B Thieme Jr. Bible Ministries, 1989), 30.

<sup>41</sup> Luka Turaki Zazzaga, *Power in the Blood of Jesus Christ: The Biblical Perspective Ibid*, 61.

on it by the High Priest. It was then sent to the bush as a sin bearer (Azazel).

It was only on the Day of Atonement, which was once in a year, that the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies to mediate for the sins of the Israelites using the blood of the slaughter animal (Lev. 16: 15-17; 20-22). Thus, it was a day of reconciliation between God and His people Israel.<sup>42</sup> Both the atonement offering on the altar and the scapegoat (Azazel) typified Christ. The significance of the Day of Atonement is much stressed on the scapegoat.

### **AZAZEL**

The scapegoat in Hebrew is *Azazel*. Etymologically, the term *Azazel* is uncertain as it has a variety of meanings from time to time. When connected with scapegoat, it may connote an entire removal from inhabitant world (Isa. 13: 21, Job. 8: 3). The sacrificial rite of scapegoat (*Azazel*) during the atonement was to remove the guilt upon the people, while sacrifices of the bull and the goat (whose blood were 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 multicolored 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.<sup>43</sup>

According to Abe, *Azazel*, is another idea of substitution, or satisfaction *vicaria* in the vicarious, holy, perfect, and satisfactory suffering of the servant of the Lord.<sup>44</sup> This concept has a profound application in the Old Testament theology of the

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<sup>42</sup> T. C. Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men* (London: Intervarsity Fellowship, 1946), 151.

<sup>43</sup> T.O. Ebhomienlen T.O. & Idemudia M.O. "Sacrifice in Yahwism and African traditional religion: The Edo Perspective" *International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research* (Vol. 5, Issue 1) 2014.

<sup>44</sup> G. O. Abe, *History and Theology of Sacrifice in the Old Testament*, *ibid.*, 67.

Suffering Servant (Is. 53; 6, 11-12). The high priest would put on his magnificent cloth of gold costume, and confessed sins on behalf of the people, and laid hands on the goat and handed it over to an appointed man to lead it away into the wilderness. The people also participated in the departure of the he-goat. They pulled out its wool, pricked it, spat on it and urged it to depart along 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 Isa. 53: 4-9, the vicarious sacrifice of Christ, Jehovah's Suffering Servant and the atonement lamb of Yahweh.

When the high priest had completed the great burnt offerings of the atonement, he would change in the sacred white garments to enable him to enter the Holy of Holies to complete the sacrificial rites. According to Ps. 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 which became a national renewal of citizenship wholly belonging to Yahweh. It was the day of the reenactment of the covenant relationship. It was the greatest of the festival where Satan was symbolically subdued, and Yahweh triumphed. It was the most solemn expression of Jewish faith in Yahweh and his worship.

## **NUMBERS 25: 6-13 IN FOCUS**

### ***Chapter summary***

The chapter reveals that Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, killed a man and Midianite woman and in doing this, he was able to stop a plague God began to circulate in the camp. Nonetheless, a total of 24,000 people died in the plague.<sup>45</sup> Because Phinehas was zealous for the Lord, God gave him His covenant of peace, to him and to his children after him, a

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<sup>45</sup> <https://biblestudyministry.com/chapter-summary-numbers-chapter-25-summary> (Accessed May, 2023)

covenant of an everlasting priesthood. The scripture says that Phinehas made an atonement for the children of Israel (Num. 25:7-11). The chapter concluded as God commanded Moses to vex the Midianites and kill them because they vexed Israel with the wiles of their fornication (Num. 25:16-18). This summarizes the entire context of the chapter in focus. This is needful to form a background to the lexical overview of the chosen periscope. The researchers have divided the chosen verses into the following: verses 6-9 and verses 10-13. There is, however, a need to look at the setting of the chapter.

### ***Setting the Context for the Study***

Numbers 31:15–16 reveals that the sexual promiscuity of men of Israel with the Moabite women recorded in Numbers 25:1–18 was a deliberate strategy of Balaam the son of Beor to incite them against the Lord.<sup>46</sup> This insight sheds some light on the redactional placement of the Balaam narratives of Numbers 22–24 before Numbers 25 to complete the first half of the narrative on the threshold of the Promise Land. These developments have a bearing on the second half of the book of Numbers commencing with a census (in Num. 26:1–65; cf. Nm 1:1–54), which marks the beginning of the new generation poised to enter the Promised Land. The plague that takes place here and later referenced as a paradigm of apostasy (Num. 25:4; 26:1; Dt 4:1–4; Jos 22:15–20; Ps 106:28–31) marks, according to Pettit the last stop of the unfaithful generation stripped of the privilege of entering the Promised Land in Numbers 14:26–38.<sup>47</sup>

### ***An Expository Overview of Numbers 25:6-13***

Phinehas, whom we are first introduced to as the last name in Aaron and Moses' genealogy in Exodus 6:14–27, has an

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<sup>46</sup> J.M. Cohen, 'Phinehas, Elijah & Circumcision', *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 41(1), 2013, 14–18.

<sup>47</sup> D.P. Pettit, "Expiating apostasy: Baal Peor, Moses, and intermarriage with a Midianite woman" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 42(4), 457–468.

Egyptian-influenced name which means ‘dark skinned.’<sup>48</sup> The subsequent prominent appearance of his name relates to the heroic act carried out in Numbers 25:7–8 that causes Yahweh’s fierce anger to be appeased and for the plague that had arisen to be quelled. In what seems like an individual initiative, Phinehas’ response is, firstly, daring on seeing Zimri and Cozbi going into a tent, perhaps for sexual pleasure, where he picks up a javelin with which in one sure strike, he exterminates the offending parties. At this stage of executing this hideous act, he had no guarantee of the outcome other than the possibility of a double murder.

### ***Part A: Verse 6-9: Judgment upon Sin***

Verses 6-9 reveals that Phinehas’ stand for righteousness stops God’s angry plague upon His people. The verses are here read:

And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel. And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand.

A curious mind would be tempted to ask the impact of the phrase “*A Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation.*” This was an especially offensive example of the sin that was happening all around Israel. A man of Israel and a Midianite woman were together near the door of

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<sup>48</sup> P.J. Budd, “Numbers” *Word Biblical Commentary* (WACO: Word Books, 1984), 280.



the tabernacle of meeting. Some commentators (such as Allen) believe this man was having sex with the Midianite woman right in front of the tabernacle, and the text tactfully obscures this, because it was so outrageous and offensive.<sup>49</sup> “The man is a blasphemer in the strongest sense. His sin is a deliberate provocateur of the wrath of the Lord, flaunting and taunting holiness in an almost unbelievable crudity.”<sup>50</sup> To a reasonable extent, Allen’s proposition is right judging from the preceding verses of the chapter 1: *while Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, 2: who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods...* (NIV).

The next thing to consider is “*Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation*”: Phinehas was one among those in Israel who would not accept this widespread rebellion against God. He brought God’s judgment by thrusting through the man of Israel and the Midianite woman with a spear – seemingly, during their immoral act. The first thing to note is that in the presence of such shocking and outrageous sin, it is common for onlookers to freeze in stunned disbelief. One man did not remain motionless. Phinehas – a grandson of Aaron (Exodus 6:25) – was the one man who acted boldly against this outrage. “His anger mirrored the divine anger.”<sup>51</sup> Secondly, Phinehas was not a vigilante, and his bold act (and God’s praise of it) do not justify vigilantism. Numbers 3-4 explains that the priests were responsible for the security of the tabernacle, guarding it against intruders, and killing those who dared to trespass. Phinehas carried out this responsibility as an authorized protector of the tabernacle, and this was an outrageous attack against the holiness of the sanctuary.

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<sup>49</sup> Gibbs Allen, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 202-203.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Beck Wenham, *Old Testament Survey* (London: SMC Press, 2003), 47.

Thirdly, “the positioning and the ability to thrust the spear through both bodies, the man’s first and then the woman’s, suggests that they had involved themselves immediately in sexual intercourse upon entering the tent.”<sup>52</sup> This agrees with Allen Gibbs position interpreting the act of the man of Israel and the Moabite woman as committing sexual intercourse. It is observed that the Hebrew of verse 6 has *the* Midianite woman, marking her as a person of some importance. “This suggests that this was not just one of the local sacred prostitutes but a person of prominence. The researchers agree with Allen that the article is used to mark her out as a pivotal player. Perhaps she is the high priestess of the religion at Baal Peor.”<sup>53</sup>

Another statement to consider is “*So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel.*” Phinehas was probably not the only one to make such a stand for righteousness. But what he did received the credit for stopping the plague. It is easy to think that the stand for righteousness made by one person makes no difference in the massive presence of sin in a community. But God can honor just one righteous act and cause it to make the difference. It could be said that through one righteous act, Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world (John 12:32). “Some Christian commentators have seen Phinehas as a type of Christ. In that he embodied the ideal of Israelite priesthood this is surely legitimate: the Lord was angry more than once with sin (Mark 3:5; 11:15ff.). Yet there is another side to it: whereas it was Phinehas’ spear that pierced the sinners that made atonement for Israel, it was the nails and spear that pierced Jesus that made atonement for the sins of the whole world.”<sup>54</sup> “The account of the action of Phinehas the priest is a revelation of how one man in loyalty to God and jealous for His honor may stand against the false attitude of a people. Phinehas dared

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<sup>52</sup> R.D. Cole, *Numbers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 34.

<sup>53</sup> Allen, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 205. Also in Crane, R., “Leviticus, Numbers”: The NIV application commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 45.

<sup>54</sup> Wenham, *Old Testament Survey*, 52.

refuse to take part in these false conventionalities and visited with immediate and terrible punishment the two notorious wrongdoers.”<sup>55</sup>

***Twenty-four thousand:*** This many died in the plague. This must have delighted Balak, king of Moab. He knew that Balaam succeeded in cursing Israel – or, rather, in getting them to curse themselves.<sup>56</sup> *Those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand:* It seems that Paul refers to this incident in 1 Corinthians 10:8, but Paul says it was 23,000 killed instead of 24,000. Clarke commented on this as thus: “The two places may be reconciled thus: 1000 men were slain in consequence of the examination instituted verse 4, and 23,000 in consequence of the orders given verse 5; making 24,000 in the whole. Apostle Paul probably refers only to the latter number.”<sup>57</sup>

*Verses 10-13: God Honors Phinehas For His Zeal:*

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.

*“Because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal:”* It was not only Phinehas’ obedience God noticed; it was also that he was

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<sup>55</sup> Chris Morgan, *Exploring the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academy, 1993), 48.

<sup>56</sup> David Guzik, *The Enduring Word Bible Commentary* adapted from [ewm@enduringword.com](mailto:ewm@enduringword.com), May, 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Philip Clarke, *The Old Testament and Its Lexical Structure* (Oregon: Harvest House Publisher, 1982), 28.

zealous with My zeal among them. Phinehas was passionate about the things God was passionate about. In this situation, Phinehas faithfully demonstrated the zeal of God against Israel's unfaithfulness to their covenant with God.

*It shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood:* God blessed Phinehas with the promise that he would be the descendant of Aaron through which the priesthood passed. This was fitting, because it was the zeal of Phinehas that *made atonement for the children of Israel*, just as a priest should be the one ministering atonement.