

Atonement in the Qur'an

Atonement is a primary theme of the Bible, but does atonement have a place in the Qur'an?

If a Muslim fails to fulfill the *Shari'a* (Islamic Law) is there any remedy acceptable to Allah? The Islamic answer is *kaffara* or atonement. Kaffara in the Qur'an is the wiping away or covering up of evil deeds.

A compilation of most *kaffara* Qur'anic verses indicates one must believe in the Allah of Islam, fear Allah and perform righteous deeds to be atoned by Allah. Note that Allah is the one who atones, not a priestly representative: “Those who believe and work righteous deeds, from them We (Allah) shall atone all evil (that may be) in them...” (Sura 29:7; see also 3:193, 195; 4:31; 5:12, 65; 8:29; 39:35; 47:2; 48:5; 64:9; 65:5; 66:8)

However, there are several instances in the Qur'an where the liable person atones for his wrongdoing himself: “Allah will not call you to account for what is futile in your oaths, but He will call you to account for your deliberate oaths: for atonement, feed ten poor persons, on a scale of the average for the food of your families, or cloth them, or give a slave his freedom. If that is beyond your means, fast for three days. That is the atonement for the oaths ye have sworn. But keep to your oaths.” (Sura 5:89; see also 5:45, 95)

Although the Qur'an contains no direct statement that commands or allows the sinner to atone for himself, Sura al-Baqara 2:271 implies this: “If you give alms openly, it is well, and if you hide it and give it to the poor, it is better for you; and this will atone some of your evil deeds; and Allah is aware of what you do.”

Atonement in the Old Testament

The Hebrew word for atonement, *kippurim*, is the counterpart of the Arabic *kaffaru*. Atonement is

referred to in a couple of different contexts in the Old Testament but we will concentrate on atonement as it relates to ritual sin offerings found in Leviticus 4.

Leviticus 4:27 starts by saying, “Now if anyone of the common people sins unintentionally...” Atonement is only possible for sins committed unintentionally. Numbers 15:28-30 says unintentional sins may be forgiven through atonement, but the defiant sinner shall be completely cut off; his iniquity shall be on him.

If the sin was unintentional, the sinner was to “lay his hand on the head of the sin offering” (Leviticus 4:29). The sinner laid one hand on the head of the sin offering, not two hands as Aaron did on the day of atonement when he laid the sins of the people on the head of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:21. The scapegoat bore the people's sins, but in contrast, the sin offering *becomes the sinner* by substitution. In placing his hand on the head of the animal, the life of the sin offering stands in place of the life of the sinner. As the animal is slaughtered, it receives the death that the sinner deserved as a consequence of sin. In this transaction, the soul of the animal substitutes for the soul of the sinner before God. You will see that this is only possible by way of the blood.

Leviticus 4:30 continues: “And the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering.” There are three important substitutes in this verse—the blood, the priest and the altar:

◆ Leviticus 17:11 states: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it (the blood) to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement (or the blood is the atoning because the life/soul is in it).” In atonement, the blood is the atoning because the life of the sinner is in it by substitution. That is why God's people are not to

eat the blood of any flesh (Leviticus 17:14) because the life of all flesh is in its blood and God gave it for atonement at the altar. And that is why “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22). The blood that the animal-substitute has shed represents more than the sinner's blood, it represents the sinner's life and soul. *The blood substitutes for the sinner's soul.*

◆ The priest wears an ephod with two onyx stones, one for each shoulder, and engraved on each stone are six names of the sons of Israel (Exodus 28:12). On the priest's breastpiece are mounted twelve precious stones according to the twelve names of the sons of Israel (Exodus 28:29). When the priest is before the altar or in the holy of holies, he represents the people of Israel before God. *The priest substitutes for the people.*

◆ The altar, like the holy of holies, represents the presence of God. We see in Leviticus 4:31 that the smoke on the altar is a soothing aroma to the Lord indicating that the Lord is present at the altar. *The altar substitutes for God's presence.*

The first action of the priest is touching the blood with his finger. Through substitution, the people (via the priest) are coming in contact with the soul of the sinner (via the blood). When someone sins, not only is communion with God severed but also communion with the community is severed; the sinner is to be cut off – punished by death. Death separates the sinner from the people. However, God provides a means of atonement in which the sinner can maintain fellowship with the people. The priest's contact with the blood represents the renewed communion of the sinner and the people. Next the priest puts the blood on the horns of the altar of burnt offering. When the priest puts the blood on the horns of the altar, communion extends beyond the sinner and the people only – there is now communion between the sinner, the people and God in one atoning act.

“Thus the priest shall make atonement for him, and he will be forgiven” (Leviticus 4:31). Through the shedding of blood and the atoning act of the priest in God’s presence, God provides forgiveness. Atonement restores a living relationship with God and with community through the vicarious death.

Atonement reveals the gravity of sin and God’s holiness. God does not trivialize sin but through atonement reveals that sin is a grave offense against His holy character. It confirms that *sin leads to death*. At the same time it reveals God’s great mercy in light of the severe offensiveness of sin. In fact *mercy sat* (the lid to the ark of the covenant) where blood is sprinkled on the day of atonement) is a translation of the Hebrew word *kappareth* – a variation of *kippurim* – meaning *the place where atonement occurs*. It is God’s mercy that gave the gift of blood for the altar to make atonement for the souls of His people. Sin is serious and has grave consequences but God provided a remedy that served as a shadow of Christ’s work on the cross – all to His glory.

New Testament Realities

Of the Old Testament Atonement

◆ Jesus Christ is the sin offering. **“Not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption”** (Hebrews 9:12). Just as the life of the sinner was in the blood of the sin offering, believers in Christ are in Him, in His death and resurrection.

◆ Jesus Christ is the high priest. **“But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle”** (Hebrews 9:11). As the priest represented God’s people, Christ represents His people. His people are His church, which is His body, the fullness of Him (Ephesians 1:22-23).

◆ Jesus Christ is the presence of God. **“Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation (*hilasterion* - place of atonement; not a substitute for, but the substance of, God’s presence) in His blood through faith.”** (Romans 3:25).

◆ Jesus Christ is the atonement. **“He Himself is the atonement for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.”** (1 John 2:2). Atonement in Christ is not limited to one unintentional sin at a time and is not limited to the people of Israel but was **once for all** (Hebrews 9:12). And it is more effective than promising forgiveness and extending ones life; Jesus conquered sin and death, provides forgiveness, gives new life in Him, and promises eternal life to those who repent and trust in Him alone.

Conclusion

The Old Testament reveals the severity and the consequences of sin; therefore we treasure the atoning death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and thank Him for giving the Holy Spirit to help us. In comparison Islam trivializes sin. A Muslim will not see the severity of sin because sin is something that the Muslim can easily deal with himself. Allah of Islam is only concerned that the sinner performs good deeds to cover the traces of his sin. We must share with Muslims and pray that they see the severity of mankind’s “illness” so they can appreciate the “cure.” The wages of sin is death, but Christ died for the Muslim world – **in this is love** (1 John 4:10).

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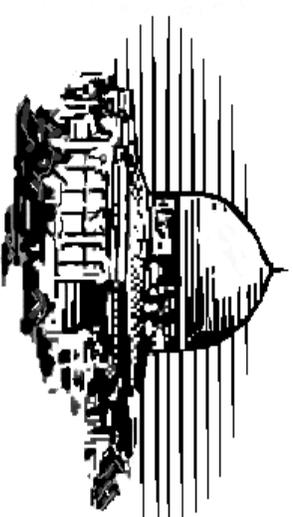
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Atonement

In the Qur'an

And in the Bible



“Those who believe and work righteous deeds, for them We (Allah) shall atone all evil in them...”
(Qur'an - Sura Al-'Ankabut 29:7)

**“In this is love,
not that we loved God,
but that He loved us and sent His Son,
the atonement for our sins.”**
(Bible - 1 John 4:10)

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