

The Meaning of כפר *Kafar* “To Make Atonement”

by Tim Hegg

The meaning of the verb כפר and the nouns associated with it (כָּפַר, כְּפָרִים, כִּפְרָת) has been a matter of dispute among the scholars. The older scholarship (represented in *BDB*) took the view that the Hebrew verb כפר was founded upon a semitic root represented in the Arabic *kafara*, “to cover, conceal, deny, disbelieve, be ungrateful,” and thus was used in the religious cult of Israel in the sense “to cover transgression,” “to conceal sin.” From this came the theological idea that the sacrificial cult of Israel “covered” sin but did not take it away. The removal of sin from the transgressor awaited the final sacrifice of the Messiah.

But this view came under heavy scrutiny. The root *kpr* is attested in the Akkadian base stem *kaparu*, meaning “wipe off, smear on.” This is classified with *kaparu* II, “pour bitumen over” and *koper* II, “pitch, tar, bitumen” and with the so-called D stem *kuppuru*, “to wipe off, clean, rub, ritually purify.”

The idea that כפר has its base meaning “to cover” was strengthened by the fact that the same root is used one time in the Tanach to mean “to cover with pitch,” Gen 6:14. In this case, the verb appears in the *Qal* stem. However, every other place the verb is found in the Tanach, it is in either the *Piel*, *Pual*, *Hitpiel*, or the rare *Nitpiel*. Averbeck notes that “from a methodological point of view, linguistically the same root in a different stem is a different word.”¹ As such, the *qal* should not necessarily be taken to indicate the meaning for the *piel* and other stems. Thus, the suggestion that כפר has as its base meaning “to cover” has been discarded by many current scholars, including evangelical scholars.

The root *kapar* is used some 150 times. It has been much discussed. There is an equivalent Arabic root meaning “cover,” or “conceal.” On the strength of this connection it has been supposed that the Hebrew word means “to cover over sin” and thus pacify the deity, making an atonement (so *BDB*). It has been suggested that the OT ritual symbolized a covering over of sin until it was dealt with in fact by the atonement of Christ. There is, however, very little evidence for this view. The connection of the Arabic word is weak and the Hebrew root is not used to mean “cover.” The Hebrew verb is never used in the simple or *Qal* stem, but only in the derived intensive stems. These intensive stems often indicate not emphasis, but merely that the verb is derived from a noun whose meaning is more basic to the root idea.²

In general, the scholarly work on this verb has given rise to three suggested root meanings: (1) to cover, (2) to ransom, (3) to wipe away. Obviously, these suggested meanings have some overlap. We may expand the idea of these three as follows:

- 1) to cover = to hide the sin or transgress from the sight of the deity in order to avert his anger.
- 2) to ransom = to make some kind of payment to the deity for the transgression in order to appease His anger.
- 3) to wipe away = to expunge the transgression and to restore the status of *sanctum* (holiness) whether to an individual, a group, a holy object, or a holy place/region.

Averbeck, in seeking to establish the meaning of the verb כפר, notes:

It seems that the place to start is neither with the cognate languages nor with other associated words from

1. *NIDOTTE*, 2:692-93.

2. R. Laird Harris, *TWOT*, 1:452-53.

the same root with Hebrew. Instead, the best place to start is with the simplest and most straightforward internal biblical syntactic structure in which the verb *kpr* is used. This is the occurrence of the verb with a direct object as opposed to an oblique object (e.g., objects introduced by prepositions) or no object at all (see, e.g., Lev 16:32). It is interesting to observe that out of the 13x when the verb has a direct object, six of them are clearly in ritual contexts (Lev 16:30, 33[2x]; Ezek 43:20, 26; 45:20) and seven are not (Gen 32:20[21]; Deut 32:43; Ps 65:3[4]; 78:38; Prov 16:14; Is 47:11; Dan 9:24). They are mutually supportive of a particular base meaning of the *piel* verb: to wipe away, wipe clean, purge.³

If we accept Averbeck’s viewpoint, that the primary meaning of כָּפַר (the *piel* stem) is to be found in those places where the verb has a clear direct object, then it’s base meaning is to be found in connection with Yom Kippur, for the verb with direct object occurs only in Lev 16 and the comparable passages in Ezek 43 and 45. If this is the case, then the base meaning is “to wipe away,” for in these contexts כָּפַר has a direct effect on *sancta*—it “wipes” *sancta* “clean,” meaning it restores the status of *sanctum* to that which had been defiled. In this way, the *qal* meaning of the verb, “to cover with pitch” is connected to the meaning of the *piel*, “to wipe (with blood).”

In Gen 6:14 we find an instrumental קָ like that in Lev 17:11, but in Gen 6:14 it means “to cover *with*” pitch whereas in Lev 17:11 it means “to wipe clean *with*” blood. The pitch was a paint-like sealant. The blood was a detergent-like cleanser. Therefore, *kpr* does not derive from “cover” any more than from “ransom.” The meaning “cover” belongs to the same verbal root but in another stem. As noted above, the same root in a different stem is a different word.⁴

Thus, the various words used to translate the verb in English translations (“forgive,” “ransom,” “atone,” etc.) are derivative rather than actual. The sinner is “forgiven” because that which besmirched a “holy” object (whether of things or persons) has been “wiped clean” by the blood. Since the Israelite is to be holy before God (“you shall be holy because I am holy,” cf. Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:6,8), it is necessary that he be “wiped clean” of his sin through the action of כָּפַר, *kafar*. The same is true of the *sancta* involved in the Tabernacle/Temple, as well as to the nation of Israel as a whole, as well as the Land given to her by covenant. Everything that has been defiled is “wiped clean by the blood” of sacrifice.

The two texts which bear most significantly on this discussion of כָּפַר are Lev 17:11 and the parallel in Ex 30:11-16.

<p>Lev 17:11 כִּי נֶפֶשׁ הַבֶּשֶׂר בַּדָּם הוּא וְאֲנִי נָתַתִּיו לָכֶם עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְכַפֵּר עַל-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם כִּי-הַדָּם הוּא בְּנַפְשׁ יִכַּפֵּר</p>	<p>For the <i>nefesh</i> of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar for <i>kafar</i> with regard to your <i>nafshot</i>, for the blood is with [by means of] the <i>nefesh</i> that will make <i>kafar</i></p>
<p>Ex 30:16 וּלְקַחְתָּ אֶת-כֶּסֶף הַכֹּפָרִים מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָתַתָּ אֹתוֹ עַל-עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהָיָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְזִכְרוֹן לְפָנַי יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר עַל-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם פ</p>	<p>And you shall take the money of <i>kippurim</i> from the children of Israel and you give it with regard to the service of the tent of meeting and it shall be for the children of Israel for a remembrance before Adonai for <i>kafar</i> in regard to your souls.</p>

The context of Lev 17 is that of the proper use of the blood of slaughtered animals: it must be used as the significant part of a sacrifice to God, or it must be poured out on the ground. It cannot be used in a

3. Ibid., 696.

4. Ibid., 699.

sacrifice to other gods, nor may it be eaten. Some have suggested, however, that the reason the animal must be brought to the Tabernacle, and not slaughtered in the open field as a sacrifice, is because offering its blood upon the altar was to atone for the killing of the sacrificial animal. At first reading, this seems to be substantiated by 17:3–4:

3 “Any man from the house of Israel who slaughters an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or who slaughters it outside the camp, 4 and has not brought it to the doorway of the tent of meeting to present it as an offering to the LORD before the tabernacle of the LORD, bloodguiltiness is to be reckoned to that man. He has shed blood and that man shall be cut off from among his people.

But this interpretation fails because nowhere in the Torah is the killing of an animal considered to be murder. The “bloodguiltiness” incurred by someone who slaughters a sacrificial animal in the field is not because he has committed murder. Rather, this Leviticus text is marking the difference between animals slaughtered for food (and the manner in which the meat of the animals could be eaten, i.e., without ingesting blood, vv. 10–16) and animals slaughtered for sacrifice (vv. 1–9). In vv. 3–4, the point is made that if someone slaughtered an animal in the field as an offering to the demons (vv. 5–7), that slaughtering would be illegitimate and the person who did so would be guilty of shedding blood for an illegitimate purpose, i.e., idolatry. The resultant penalty would be severe: being cut off from his people. Likewise, when an animal was slaughtered for food, the blood could not be misused, i.e., eaten. Since the blood of animals was given to Israel specifically for the sacrifice, it could not be eaten. The sacrifice was a dramatic picture of the principle of substitution: a life for a life. Since the life (*nefesh*) of the animal was contained in the blood, splashing the blood upon the altar was specifically to demonstrate this substitutionary reality: the life of the animal as *kafar* for the life of the worshiper.

In the last clause of v. 11, the use of the preposition ב in בַּנֶּפֶשׁ (*banefesh*) is important. This final clause is not a reiteration of the opening clause of the verse, because the wording is different. The opening clause states that the *nefesh* is *in the blood*, while the final clause states that the blood makes *kafar banefesh*, בַּנֶּפֶשׁ, where the preposition ב most likely means “by means of, with.” The proper use of the blood of a sacrificial animal was to be put upon the altar, because it is *by means* of the blood that *kafar* would be affected. Averbeck offers this conclusion to the interpretation of Lev 17:11–

In summary, blood atonement is mentioned in Lev 17:11 as the rationale for draining the blood from the domesticated animal before eating the meat. The point is not that the blood atones for killing the animal but, instead, that if one was going to utilize the blood for anything, its only proper use was to make atonement on the altar of the Lord. To eat the blood would be to eat not only the flesh of the animal but to eat the animal’s *nefesh*, which the Creator of all *nefesh* (Gen 1:20–21, 24, 30; 2:7, 19) had long ago reserved for Himself (Gen 9:3–5) and now assigned to the purpose of atonement alone (Lev. 7:11, 14).⁵

Exodus 30:16 and Leviticus 17:11 find a direct connection to each other in their close verbal agreement. The phrase “for *kafar* in regard to your souls” is identical in both (לְכַפֵּר עַל-נַפְשֵׁיְכֶם). But how does the giving of money affect *kafar* for one’s soul? The important interpretive question in this text is the subject of the verb הָיָה (“it shall be”) of the second clause: “it shall be for the children of Israel for a remembrance before Adonai for *kafar* in regard to your souls.” Traditionally this second clause has been interpreted to mean that the money of *kafar* is a remembrance before Adonai, but it seems more probable that the subject is the previously mention אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד (*’oheil moeid*), “tent of meeting.” The *kafar* money was to be given “in regard to the service of the tent of meeting,” and it was the tent of meeting that would stand as a remembrance before Adonai in the process of affecting *kafar*. This use of the term “remembrance” (זִכָּרוֹן, *zicharon*) parallels the terms describing Yom Teruah (Lev 23:24):

5. Averbeck, Op. cit., p. 695.

Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘In the seventh month on the first of the month you shall have a rest, a reminder (זִכְרוֹן) by blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation.’

In the same manner in which the blowing of the trumpets on Yom Teruah functioned as a memorial before Adonai, so the entire service of the tent of meeting would stand before the Holy One as a remembrance of the *kafar* that would be made there on behalf of the people. It is not the money of *kafar* that affects *kafar*. Rather, the money is given to establish and maintain the Tabernacle, which is the place where *kafar* is affected because the Tabernacle stands as a “remembrance” before Adonai of His provision of *kafar* for Israel. Moreover, the sacrifices of Yom Kippur, that were given for the cleansing of the Tent and altar, are specifically said ultimately to be for the purpose of affecting *kafar* for the priests and the people (Lev 16: 33):

and atone the holy sanctuary, and he shall atone the tent of meeting and the altar. He [thus] shall make atonement on behalf of (לְ) the priests and on behalf (לְ) all the people of the assembly.

The difficulty in interpreting the meaning of *kafar* in the Tanach is in the arena of biblical theology. People often fail to differentiate between atonement in a temporal sense and atonement that pertains to eternity. The animal sacrifices conducted in the Tabernacle and Temple, along with the payment of money for atonement (Ex 30:16), actually did affect atonement on a temporal basis as the Tanach plainly teaches. By this I mean that God set forth His laws by which atonement would be made for the altar and other sacred objects of the Tabernacle/Temple; for the priests in their ordination to their sacred service; for anyone who had committed an offense against his fellowman or was defiled by that which render a person ritually unclean. This temporal atonement returned the object or person to a state of acceptance within the community or within the sacred area of the Tabernacle or Temple. But such temporal atonement, while real and effective, does not speak to the forgiveness of sins in the court of Heaven and the divine declaration of righteousness. Such eternal atonement was only granted on the basis of faith in the ultimate and final sacrifice of Yeshua on behalf of sinners. And it was equally granted to those who lived before the coming of Yeshua, who believed upon and hoped for Him and relied by faith upon the eternal atonement that He would accomplish as it is for those who have believed upon Him after His death, resurrection, ascension to perform the duties of the High Priest in the Heavenly tabernacle. To put it in other words, since the meaning of “atonement” is “to wipe away,” the temporal atonement made through sacrificial means in the Tabernacle and Temple “wiped away” that which made a person ritually unclean or in some way put them outside of the *sanctum* of the Tabernacle/Temple or the wider community. Such temporal atonement restored temporal relationships. The eternal atonement accomplished by Yeshua “wiped away” that which rendered the sinner as under God’s eternal wrath and restored the sinner to fellowship with the Almighty. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it:

For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Messiah, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb 9:13–14)

Of course, those who exercised genuine faith in God and His Messiah undoubtedly saw the connection between their obedient giving of sacrifices and the ultimate sacrifice of Yeshua. In this way, the temporal atonement was a fitting and revealing picture of the eternal atonement accomplished by our Messiah.

In the Lxx, the Hebrew verb *kafar* is most often represented by the Greek ἐξιλάσκομαι (*exilaskomai*), “to make atonement,” “to be atoned for,” “to be purged from something,” and sometimes by ἁγιάζω (*hagiazō*), “to sanctify,” καθαρίζω, (*katharizo*), “to make clean,” περικαθαρίζω (*perikatharizo*) “to cleanse,” ἀφίημι (*aphieimi*), “to forgive,” and ἀφαιρέω (*aphaireō*), “to take away.” The nouns of the *kafar* group are represented by λύτρον (*lutron*), “ransom,” καθαρισμός (*katharismos*), “cleansing,

purification,” ἐξιλασμός (*exilasmos*), “atonement, propitiation,” ἱλασμός (*hilasmos*), “propitiation, means of forgiveness,” ἀλλαγμα (*allagma*), “exchange, ransom,” and περικαθάρμα (*perikatharma*), “ransom.”

Atonement in the Apostolic Scriptures

Atonement in the Apostolic Scriptures is represented by a number of Greek terms, including ἱλάσκομαι (*hilaskomai*), “to be merciful, pardon, be propitious” (Lk 18:13; Heb 2:17), ἱλάσμος (*hilasmos*), “propitiation” (1Jn 2:2; 4:10), ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*), “propitiation, mercy seat, place of forgiveness” (Rom 3:25; Heb 9:5), and λυτρόω (*lutroo*), “to ransom, redeem” (Luke 24:21; Titus 2:14; 1Pet 1:18). These words, though not translated by “atonement” or “atone” in our English translations, are some of the same words used by the Lxx translators to translate words in the *kafar* group of the Tanach, and should therefore be understood as carrying, to one extent or another, the meaning of *kafar* and its cognate terms.

We see, then, that the meaning of *kafar* as “to wipe away,” “wash away” is well represented by the words that convey “pardon,” “to be propitious toward someone,” and “to forgive.”

Conclusion

The older idea that “atonement” was only a “temporary fix” for sins for those who lived in the time before the coming of our Messiah must be abandoned. The idea of atonement as portrayed in the Scriptures encompasses both a temporal aspect as well as an eternal one. The atonement effected by the sacrifices in the Tabernacle and Temple was an actual atonement that affected the return of a “holy” or “ritually pure” status to objects and people. This return to such a status was in relationship to the earthly Tabernacle/Temple or to the community itself. The atonement secured by Yeshua through His saving sacrifice and His work as our Great High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary brought about an eternal status of “holy,” that is, “righteous” for all who by faith are marked by this atonement. It is therefore proper to speak of the “atonement” made for us by Yeshua, for in His death on behalf of His people, He “wiped away” our sins and saved us from the penalty we deserved because of them.