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WITNESSING TO THE MESSIANIC FULFILLMENT OF THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

by Daniel Mann

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Jesus informed the Pharisees that the Hebrew Scriptures were about Him (John 5:39). Even the Hebrew holidays such as the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur—bear unmistakable witness to Jesus.

Rabbi Tovia Singer tries to deny this witness. In responding to the question, “Why didn’t the red ribbon on the head of the Scapegoat [on Yom Kippur] turn white in 30 CE [AD]?” he reluctantly admits that:

In Tractate Yoma 39b, the Talmud...discusses numerous remarkable phenomena that occurred in the Temple during the Yom Kippur service...There was a strip of scarlet-dyed wool tied to the head of the scapegoat which would turn white in the presence of the large crowd gathered at the Temple on the Day of Atonement. The Jewish people perceived this miraculous transformation as a heavenly sign that their sins were forgiven. The Talmud relates, however, that 40 years before the destruction of the second Temple [approximately AD 30] the scarlet colored strip of wool did not turn white.¹

Following the Crucifixion, the scarlet wool would no longer become white. God had put Israel on notice that He would no longer accept animal sacrifices now that the ultimate offering had been fulfilled.

How does Singer explain this cessation at the very time of the cross? He claims that various miracles were gradually disappearing because Israel's "dedication to the golden rule slacked off."

Singer also believes that God had been angry with Jesus for deceiving Israel. However, if so, we'd have expected Him to grant signs of His *approval* of the crucifixion instead of a sign of *disapproval*—that He no longer honored the scapegoat to take away Israel's sins. God's timing couldn't have been worse for Singer.

Yom Kippur Bears Witness to the Messiah in Other Ways. It is not surprising that God's greatest secret was hidden away in the most holy place of the Temple, where only the high priest could enter and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

The "atonement cover," also translated as the "mercy seat," covered the Ark of the Covenant, and was itself covered by the massive wings of two golden cherubim to prevent it from being seen. When the high priest entered this holiest place on that holiest day—Yom Kippur—he had to enter with great plumes of smoke generated by his incense censer, to prevent him from seeing the mercy seat and being struck dead (Lev. 16:2):

Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering. He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. He is to put the incense on the fire before the Lord, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony [the Ten Commandments which had been placed in the ark], so that he will not die. (Lev. 16:11–13 NIV)

This provokes many questions. Why should the atonement cover, or mercy seat, be so carefully concealed, and why the accompanying threat of death? Shouldn't something called the "mercy seat" have been foremost among God's self-disclosures? Wouldn't God want to display the fullness of His mercy?

Seeing God could *also* bring death (Exod. 33:20; Gen. 32:30; Judges 13:22). Was this threat related to the danger of seeing the mercy seat? Adding to this mystery, the mercy seat rested *above* the ark containing the tablets of the Ten Commandments. This seemed to suggest that this mysterious cover might even have a *greater* stature than the Law.

Furthermore, God would meet with Israel above the mercy seat (Exod. 30:6), where He was mysteriously “enthroned between the covering cherubim” (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; Ps. 80:1; 99:1), halfway between concealment and disclosure. This mercy seat therefore seemed to have been intimately related to God’s provision of mercy. (It’s where Israel came to receive His mercy.) Why then would God so strenuously hide it?

Apparently, This Wasn’t God’s Only Mystery (Deut. 29:29; Prov. 25:2). The mercy seat was associated with the *other* divine mysteries: God’s atonement, new covenant, and Messiah. Although He had ordained the Levites to make atonement for Israel’s sins, He cryptically revealed that *He* would provide the decisive atonement: “Rejoice, O nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people” (Deut. 32:43; Ps. 65:3; 79:9). However, He conspicuously neglected to disclose the redemption or atonement price: “For this is what the LORD says: ‘You were sold for nothing, and without money you will be redeemed’” (Isa. 52:3).

Redemption always costs. What then would the atonement for God’s people cost? This disclosure is curiously opaque. This takes us back to the question of the nature of the atonement cover resting on the ark and the Law it contained. Why this complex of mysteries—the atonement, its price, and its agent? Wasn’t the Law, with its sacrificial system, adequate? Evidently not. Seemingly, this sacrificial system would be superseded by a new but still hidden atonement or mercy.

Along with this mystery are the many references to *God* as Redeemer (Ps. 19:14; Isa. 35:9–10). According to Mosaic Law, the Levites fulfilled the role of “redeemer” (Lev. 1:4; 4:20, 31; 16:21, 24; Num. 8:12). Why then the payment of a different ransom by a different priest?

Clearly, the former Mosaic stipulations weren’t adequate! Instead, Isaiah cryptically mentions a messianic figure who would initiate a new covenant: “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to *be a covenant* for the people and a light for the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:6; 49:8, emphasis added).

This mysterious figure would not simply initiate a new covenant. He would actually *be* the covenant. However, He too was part of the mystery: “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and *concealed* me in his quiver” (Isa. 49:2; 51:16; 52:10; 53:1–3, emphasis added). Curiously, God hid His Messiah in full view: “I am going to bring my servant, the Branch [of David]...and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day” (Zech. 3:8–9; Isa. 52:13–53:12).

Could It Be That All of These Mysteries Find Their Fulfillment in the Messiah Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20)? The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) translates the Hebrew word *kapporeth* (Lev. 16:2, 13; “mercy seat”) as *hilasterion* in the Greek. Paul borrows this same Greek word for Romans 3:25: “God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement [*hilasterion*; “propitiation,” KJV] through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.”

Paul applied the Septuagint’s word for “mercy seat” (Lev. 16) to Christ. *Christ* is that concealed mercy seat. Christ is also the New Covenant. Christ is that “hidden arrow.” Christ is also the cost of our forgiveness (Isa. 52:3; Heb. 9:14). It was Christ’s death on the cross that fulfilled the mysteries and all of the promises of God (2 Cor. 1:20).

Consequently, the curtain of the temple was rent in two (Matt. 27:51), signifying that we could now come boldly into the presence of our Beloved (Hos. 2:18–19) and gaze in wonder on that once-concealed mercy seat. It was even Jesus who *secretly* led Israel in the desert (Num. 20:16; Exod. 23:20–23; 14:19; 33:2–3, 14) and fed them (1 Cor. 10:4).

But Why Had God Been So Cryptic about His Messiah? There are at least two reasons for this. God’s glory is a peculiar glory but also repugnant to human sensibilities. For God, glory is a demonstration of His righteousness and self-sacrifice—the cross: “Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once” (John 13:31–32). For those who are not adequately prepared for this revelation, the “glory” of a man dying on a Roman cross is detestable foolishness—it is a throwing of pearls before swine.

Joseph couldn’t throw his pearls before his brethren if they were still unrepentant. Therefore, when Joseph’s brothers came to him seeking grain during the great famine, he didn’t disclose his identity. Instead, he tested them in ways that appear cruel. In the end, he observed how willing they were to lay their lives down for their youngest and favored brother, Benjamin—the one they probably even envied, as they had Joseph. At that very point, Joseph broke down and sent all of his Egyptian guards out of the room. They weren’t ready for his disclosure, but his brothers were (Gen. 42–45).

There is some knowledge that can destroy us if we are not ready for it. When I became a supervisor in the New York City Department of Probation, I determined to be as Christ-like as I possibly could. Foolishly, I thought that if I was totally trans - parent

with my subordinates and demonstrated my commitment to justice and their welfare, they would reciprocate. However, they mistook kindness for weakness, and tried to get away with murder – my murder!

Consequently, I had to bring charges against them. They hated me, and, despite my good intentions, I unintentionally hated them. I learned that many people are not prepared to receive disclosure. In fact, it will hurt them.

There Is Another Reason Why God Didn't Disclose All. It would have interfered with His plan: “We declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:7–8). God had a reason for hiding Jesus, the mercy seat. Now we have a reason to search Him out (Prov. 25:2) and adore Him all the more. —*Daniel Mann*

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1 www.outreachjudaism.org.