

Charles Meeks, "Azazel,"
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(Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

AZAZEL (אִזָּזֵל, azazel). Unclear designation in Lev 16:8, 10, 26 related to the scapegoat ceremony on the Day of Atonement. Multiple theories exist regarding its meaning.

Biblical Relevance

The term "Azazel" appears in the Old Testament only in Lev 16:8, 10, 26, in a passage prescribing Israel's practices on the Day of Atonement. The priest is instructed to bring two goats to the entrance of the tent of meeting as a sin offering for the people (Lev 16:5–7). Lots are to be cast for the goats, one for Yahweh and one for Azazel. Yahweh's goat is used as a sin offering; its blood is sprinkled on the mercy seat and all over the altar (Lev 16:15–19).

The goat for Azazel is not to be sacrificed, according to the instructions. Instead, the priest "must present alive before Yahweh the goat on which the lot for Azazel fell to make atonement for himself, to send it away into the desert to Azazel" (Lev 16:10). The priest is to lay his hands on the goat and "confess over it all the Israelites' iniquities" (Lev 16:21). The man who releases the goat into the wilderness must ritually wash his clothes and himself (Lev 16:26).

The release of an animal for the sake of the removal of sins has parallels. In Lev 14:1–9, for example, two birds are presented for the cleansing of a leper. One is killed, and its blood put upon the other bird and the leper. When the second bird is released, the leper is declared clean (Zatelli, "Origin," 260–62).

Possible Meanings

Studies on the meaning of Azazel tend to focus on textual and linguistic evidence. The relevant scholarly discussion has generated four primary options: Azazel could be

1. the name of a demon
2. a location
3. an abstract noun
4. a compound word.

Whichever meaning is correct, the biblical text emphasizes the removal of sin more than the details relating to the goat itself (Schultz, "Azazel," 657–58; Pinker, "Goat," 19–21).

Option 1: Name of a Demon

Pseudepigraphic depictions of Azazel as a demon are prominent, and the wilderness was typically viewed as the abode of demons (De Verteuil, "Scapegoat," 210; Pinker, "Goat," 4–9; Ball, "Azazel," 77). Azazel is featured briefly in the pseudepigraphic work 1 Enoch at 8:1; 9:6; 10:4–8; and 13:1–3. He is described there as the demon who taught humans metalworking (for the creation of weapons and adornments) and was cast into the desert as punishment (Schultz, "Azazel," 657–58; Grabbe, "Scapegoat," 153–56; Hanson, "Rebellion," 222–25; Helm, "Azazel," 217–22; Tawil, "Azazel," 52–56). Relying on the use of the word "goat" (אֵל, el) in the construction of the name, it is possible that Azazel

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was imagined as a satyr-like demon roaming the desert, leading to the prohibition in Lev 17:7 against worshipping satyrs (de Verteuil, "Scapegoat," 217–18).

The sacrifice of two goats, one to God and one to Azazel, could represent a balanced theological dichotomy (De Verteuil, "Scapegoat," 213; Frey-Anthes, "Concepts," 48). This practice might make sense in light of similar rituals across the ancient Near East, especially in certain Babylonian and Hittite rituals and in early Mesopotamian literature (Tawil, Disposal, 31–74; "Azazel," 47–52; Schultz, "Azazel," 657–58; Zatelli, "Origin," 258–60; Hook, "Theory," 9). Scholars such as Pinker discount this theory, however, on account of Israel's monotheism. Based on his assessment of other ancient Near Eastern practices, Pinker argues that both goats in the Levitical ritual were for the same God (Pinker, "Goat," 16–18).

In some extrabiblical texts, Azazel appears to function possibly as an analogue for Satan himself (Grabbe, "Scapegoat," 156–58; Helm, "Azazel," 222–24; Maclean, "Barabbas," 320). In the Apocalypse of Abraham (13:4–9; 14:5–6; 20:5; 23:7; 31:5), Azazel appears as a competitor for God's glory. He is portrayed as the one who persuaded Adam and Eve to disobey God, who tried to lead Abraham astray, and who received soiled priestly garments (Orlov, Dark, 4–7; 49; 66).

Option 2: Location

Azazel could refer to a place such as a cliff from which the goat would be thrown. The later Jewish practice of killing the sin-offering goat by pushing it off a cliff supports this (m. Yoma 6:6; compare Pinker, "Goat," 9–10; Kiuchi, "Living," 258–59; Tawil, "Azazel," 44–45),

Option 3: Abstract Noun

Azazel could mean "destruction" or "entire removal" (compare Schultz, "Azazel," 657–58; Pinker, "Goat," 10–12; Caldwell, "Doctrine," 30).

Option 4: Compound Word

Azazel might be a word created by combining "goat" (עֵז, *el*) with "to go away" (אָזַל, *azal*) to produce the meaning "goat that goes away." This is supported by the translation of Azazel in the Septuagint and Vulgate as ἀποπομπάϊος (*apopompaios*) and caper emissarius, respectively, though the fact that the goat goes to Azazel in Lev 16:10 is an argument against (Schultz, "Azazel," 657–58; Pinker, "Goat," 3, 12; de Roo, "Goat," 233, 235–37; Maclean, "Barabbas," 315–16).

Selected Resources for Further Study

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