

# Kaffâra - Atonement

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The Bible and the Qur'an both mention Kaffâra, which can be translated as atonement, expiation, ransom or redemption. However, the Bible provides the most comprehensive study on the subject. The promises of God that he would make Kaffâra - atonement - for his people are mentioned several times in the Qur'an, but without any explicit mechanism. The Qur'an says that Allah will atone for evil deeds (Surah 65:5; 29:7; 5:45,65,89, etc.), however it implies that the believers' good deeds have a part to play (Surah 11:114). However, there is no way of knowing if atonement has been made or not. On the other hand the Qur'an states: "He forgiveth whom He will and punisheth whom He will" (Surah 3:129; 11:118; 14:4; 16:93; 19:71,72). Muslim traditions say that God has already created some for hell and others for paradise. Muhammad is alleged to have said:

"God created Adam, then passed His right hand over his back and brought forth from it his offspring, saying, 'I have created these for paradise and they will do the deeds of those who go to paradise.' He then passed his hand over his back and brought forth from it his offspring, saying, 'I have created these for hell and they will do the deeds of those who go to hell.'" (Mishkat Al-Masabih, Vol. I, p.116)

## The Biblical View of Atonement

God can do whatever is in his will but if he is to forgive the sinner, being a God of justice, he must forgive justly. Through Moses, God instituted the offering of animal sacrifices. He accepted these because they symbolised the sacrifice he was going to provide for the whole of mankind. The Bible insists that God is just and his justice demands the punishment of the sinner. The only way out is either to die eternally, or be reconciled through his atonement.

The practice of sacrifices to cover sin began with the first humans, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and it was God who covered their nakedness - an enacted parable of atonement (Genesis 4:4). Later, God only accepted the sacrifice of Abel and not of Cain. When we look at this story in the Bible and in the Qur'an, we see that Adam's family must have been taught a particular way to approach God (Genesis 4:4; Surah 5:27-32). People had to realise that the result of sin is death. But a ransom (*fidyah*) or sacrifice made in faith can redeem the sinner. The sacrifice may be seen as a substitute for the sinner.

This is illustrated by Abraham and his son (Genesis 22:1-14). Another example is the Passover lamb. After sending many plagues on Egypt, God said he would kill all the first-born children in that land. However, God told Moses to command his people to slaughter a lamb and sprinkle its blood on their door-posts. The angel of God would then pass over every door which had the blood on it and the first-born in that house would be spared. God

fulfilled his promise and the first-born of Israel were saved (Exodus 12:1-42).

## **Atonement and the Law of Moses**

In the law of Moses, recorded in the book of Leviticus, God revealed that the way to approach him is through sacrifice. He said: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrew 9:22; Leviticus 17:11). Moses explained the method of sacrifice to the Israelites: the sinner was to take a perfect animal to the door of the temple of God. There he was to put his hands on it, symbolically transferring his sins onto the animal. Next he had to kill it. The priest would sprinkle its blood at the foot of the altar and offer the rest to God on the altar. God would accept the animal's death in place of the death of the sinner.

## **Jesus: Zabih-ullah, the sacrifice of God**

How can an animal die for a human, when we are of much greater value than any animal? The animal did not take away sin; it was merely a symbol pointing to what was to come. God permitted such a situation until the perfect sacrifice would be offered for all sin. This offering would be for the sin of all people, those living and dead and those not yet born. After Moses, many prophets of God came to prophesy about this great sacrifice. One such prophet was Isaiah. He made an astonishing prophecy which was fulfilled centuries later, in the life and death of Jesus who accomplished God's purpose (Isaiah 52:12-15, 53:1-12).

John the Baptist, whom Muslims know as Yahya, testified: "Look, the Lamb of God,

who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Muslims however reject Jesus as the vicarious atonement. Yusuf Ali, a Muslim translator and commentator of the Qur'an, comments, "We are fully responsible for our acts ourselves: We cannot transfer the consequences to someone else. Nor can anyone vicariously atone for our sins." (Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an, Text, Translation and Commentary*, p.339).

However this contradicts a passage of the Qur'an, where we see one life being substituted for another. Where Abraham shows his willingness to sacrifice his son (though the name of the son is not mentioned in the Qur'an, the narrative is similar to the biblical account) God provides the sacrifice in the place of the boy. Then God is reported to have said in regard to Abraham: "We ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice" (Surah 37:99-111).

Usually Muslim commentators tell us that the "momentous sacrifice" was the ram provided by God to be sacrificed in place of Abraham's son. But would a ram be a "momentous sacrifice" compared to Abraham's son? Note that it was the son, not Abraham, who was ransomed by the provision of that ram, so the "momentous sacrifice" by which Abraham was to be ransomed must refer to some other utterly essential sacrifice offered by God himself. This raises the question: Was it pointing forward to a great sacrifice in the future?

In the Qur'an these incidents have not been described in detail, but they are comprehensively recorded in the Bible. Here we learn what that sacrifice was, by which God has ransomed not only

Abraham, but also all who, like Abraham, believe and are faithful. Jesus Christ is the one who has been made the sacrifice and ransom for the whole world. Jesus once said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Again speaking of himself he said that he 'did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28). Jesus is presented as a sacrifice and a ransom in the Torah, the Psalms and also in the books of the Prophets. There we learn that people through the ages were expecting God to redeem them from sin and eternal death through his mighty power. Thus in God's own time, Jesus arrived to fulfil this mission. He gave himself as a ransom, to die on the cross according to God's will

and then to rise on the third day. Before his ascension he told his disciples: This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:46).

The story of redemption from sin does not finish there. It does not mean merely deliverance from the punishment for sin. Jesus has become the mediator. Through him we encounter true recognition of God and are able to establish a true and strong relationship with him. The Christian Scriptures can tell you more about the subject of atonement. If you would like a copy in the English language, please contact us\*.

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