

The Scarlet Thread of Yom Kippur: The Scapegoat, the Whitening Sign, and Its Jewish and Christian Interpretations

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The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) stands at the theological center of the priestly sacrificial system. Described in Leviticus 16, the ritual seeks to restore the relationship between Israel and God through an elaborate ceremony of purification involving the sanctuary, the priesthood, and the people.

The most dramatic element of the ceremony is the ritual of the two goats. One goat is sacrificed to the Lord as a purification offering, while the other – the so-called scapegoat – is sent into the wilderness carrying the sins of Israel (Lev 16:7–10). The ritual thus creates a powerful symbolic representation of the removal of guilt from the community.

Although the biblical account provides the fundamental structure of the ceremony, later Jewish tradition further elaborated its details. Among the most intriguing developments is the custom of tying a strip of scarlet wool to the scapegoat. According to rabbinic sources, this thread would miraculously turn white when the atonement was accepted.

It is noteworthy that the biblical description in Leviticus contains no explicit reference to such a thread. The custom appears first in later rabbinic sources, which indicates that the practice most plausibly emerged as a secondary ritual elaboration intended to make the otherwise invisible process of atonement perceptible through symbolic action, rather than reflecting an original element of the biblical ritual (Ayali-Darshan, 2020). This absence in earlier sources underscores the extent to which interpretive communities actively engaged with their sacred texts in order to render abstract theological claims more concrete.

The tradition becomes even more striking in light of a statement preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, which claims that the miracle ceased forty years before the destruction of the Second Temple. This chronological note – placing the cessation of the sign around the year 30 CE – has become the subject of significant interpretation within both Jewish and Christian thought.

This talmudic observation should not be read merely as a historical recollection but as a retrospective theological construction, characteristic of rabbinic narrative strategies that seek to interpret past ritual phenomena through the lens of later historical crises. In this sense, the “cessation” functions less as an empirical report and more as a symbolic marker of discontinuity between an idealized past of divine favor and a perceived present of diminished spiritual efficacy.

This study explores the historical development and theological significance of the scarlet thread tradition. By analyzing biblical texts, Second Temple writings, rabbinic literature, and early Christian interpretation, it seeks to illuminate the symbolic function of the thread and the meaning attributed to its disappearance. In doing so, it also seeks to bridge historical analysis with interpretive inquiry, showing how ritual and imagination intertwine.

This article argues that the tradition of the scarlet thread represents a secondary ritual development that functioned to materialize the otherwise invisible process of atonement, and that its later interpretation – especially the motif of its cessation – reflects a shift from a cultic-symbolic framework toward a moral and theological reconfiguration of atonement in both Jewish and Christian traditions.

1. The Scapegoat Ritual in Leviticus 16

Leviticus 16 describes the liturgy of Yom Kippur in the context of priestly regulations concerning holiness and impurity. The chapter begins with a reference to the death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 16:1), thereby emphasizing the danger inherent in approaching the divine presence without proper ritual mediation (Tronina, 2006, pp. 233, 238, 244; Łach, 1970, p. 211).

Two goats are brought before the Lord, and lots are cast¹:

Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel (Lev 16:8).

The first goat is sacrificed as a purification offering. The second goat remains alive while the high priest lays his hands upon its head and confesses the sins of the people:

He shall confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel (Lev 16:21).

The key theological concept of the ritual is expressed through the Hebrew verb *nāsāʾ*, meaning “to bear” or “carry.” The scapegoat is said to bear the sins of Israel into the wilderness (Lev 16:22) (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, p. 31; Tronina, 2006, p. 246; Łach, 1970, p. 214).

The ritual therefore dramatizes the removal of sin from the community. Rather than merely proclaiming forgiveness, it offers a visual representation of the transfer and expulsion of guilt (Tronina, 2006, p. 239; Kiuchi, 1987, pp. 56, 65, 147–156). This performative aspect suggests that participants were not merely observers but witnesses to a tangible enactment of divine justice.

Anthropological studies of ancient ritual systems have observed that symbolic transfers of impurity often involved tangible objects that could absorb the pollution before being removed from the community, a dynamic that provides an illuminating background to the later Jewish custom of attaching a physical thread to the scapegoat (Ayali-Darshan, 2020; Zohar, 1988, p. 615).

Rabbinic tradition appears to intensify this logic by not only externalizing impurity onto a material object but also by introducing a secondary visual confirmation of its removal. The addition of the thread thus transforms the ritual from a purely performative act into a semi-otic system, in which meaning is generated not only through action

¹ The lots consisted of small tablets made of boxwood (Milgrom, 1991, pp. 1019–1020).

but through observable transformation, effectively bridging the gap between ritual process and communal perception.

The wilderness plays an important symbolic role. In biblical thought, the desert often represents a place outside ordered human society – a realm associated with chaos and impurity (Hałas, 1999, pp. 43–75). By sending the scapegoat into this domain, the ritual symbolically removes sin from the sacred space of Israel (Rooker, 2000, p. 216; Łach, 1970, p. 214). It also visually reinforces the boundary between the sacred and the profane, thus making theological concepts experiential.

2. The Meaning of Azazel

The identity of Azazel has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. Over time, several interpretive approaches have been proposed, which are best understood not as mutually exclusive alternatives but as complementary attempts to account for a complex and multivalent term. Three principal trajectories may nevertheless be distinguished.

One line of interpretation understands Azazel as a demonic or semi-mythical figure associated with the wilderness. This interpretation draws support from ancient Jewish traditions, particularly the Book of Enoch, where Azazel appears as a fallen angel connected with corruption and impurity (1 Enoch 8–10; b. Yoma 67b; Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 46) (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, pp. 85–88, 128). Within rabbinic literature, however, such mythological associations are often preserved in a controlled and fragmentary manner, suggesting an intentional tension between inherited mythic motifs and an emerging theological preference for demythologization. The figure of Azazel thus operates at the intersection of myth and ritual function, allowing the tradition to retain symbolic depth without fully committing to a developed demonology.

Within this framework, the scapegoat is not merely removed from the community but symbolically returned to the realm of disorder and impurity from which sin is thought to originate. Such an interpretation highlights the cosmological dimension of the ritual, in which the

boundary between the ordered community and the chaotic wilderness is ritually reinforced (Tronina, 2006, pp. 240, 250; Lach, 1970, p. 212).

A second approach interprets Azazel as a geographical designation rather than a personal entity. According to this reading, the phrase “for Azazel” refers simply to a remote or desolate location in the wilderness (Driver, 1956, p. 97; Tronina, 2006, p. 240). Here the emphasis shifts away from mythological speculation toward the spatial dynamics of the ritual itself: the removal of sin is enacted through physical displacement into an uninhabited and symbolically charged landscape. This interpretation underscores the importance of distance and separation as key elements in the logic of atonement.

A third line of interpretation approaches the term from a linguistic and functional perspective, deriving it from the Hebrew root *ʾzl*, “to go away” or “remove.” In this view, Azazel does not denote a figure or a place but rather encapsulates the very process of elimination or expulsion of sin (Tronina, 2006, p. 240). Comparative studies of Anatolian and Hittite rituals, in which animals bearing cords or threads were expelled to carry away impurity, provide important analogies that support this interpretation (Ayali-Darshan, 2020). Such parallels suggest that the primary meaning of the ritual lies in its performative function rather than in the precise identification of Azazel.

Although no single interpretation has achieved universal acceptance, many contemporary scholars emphasize this functional dimension of the term. From this perspective, the scapegoat ritual is best understood not as a reflection of a specific mythological narrative but as a carefully structured symbolic action aimed at removing impurity and restoring communal order (Grabbe, 1987, pp. 152–167; Helm, 1994, pp. 217–226; Münnich, 2002, pp. 89–108).

3. The Scarlet Thread in the Mishnah

The earliest explicit reference to the scarlet thread appears in the Mishnah, particularly in tractate Yoma, which preserves traditions related to the Temple liturgy of Yom Kippur (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003,

pp. 130–131). This chronological gap between Leviticus and the Mishnah strongly suggests that the motif represents a later ritual elaboration rather than an original prescription.

The iconographic significance of this element is further highlighted by its presence in ancient Jewish art; for instance, the mosaics found in the synagogues of Beit Alpha and Sepphoris depict the ram from the Binding of Isaac suspended from a tree by a reddish rope, imagery that closely echoes the motif of the red ribbon tied to the scapegoat (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, p. 129; Weiss & Netzer, 1996, p. 31; Sukenik, 1932, plate XIX).

The Mishnah states:

He tied a scarlet thread to the head of the goat (m. Yoma 4:2)².

Although the statement itself is terse and procedural, its very brevity reflects a broader Mishnaic tendency to assume a shared ritual knowledge while leaving symbolic interpretation implicit. This laconic style invites later rabbinic elaboration, which increasingly foregrounds the theological meaning of the act rather than its technical execution, thereby opening space for the development of the whitening tradition.

Another passage explains that a portion of the thread was also attached to the Temple gate:

At first they tied a scarlet thread to the entrance of the sanctuary from the inside (b. Yoma 67a).

The Palestinian Talmud outlines a historical shift in the placement of this thread: initially, it was hung in the windows of private homes, then moved to the sanctuary entrance, and ultimately attached directly to the rock before the goat was cast off (j. Yoma 6:5, 43d). This evolution suggests a gradual movement from a more public, communal ritual context toward more concentrated symbolic acts within the Temple space (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, p. 131).

2 All English renderings of the Mishnaic and Talmudic sources are provided by the author.

According to rabbinic descriptions preserved in the Mishnah and later Talmudic discussions, the scarlet thread could be divided into sections, with one part attached to the goat and another displayed within the Temple precincts, thereby allowing the community to witness the transformation associated with the ritual (Ayali-Darshan, 2020).

The ritual had both practical and symbolic dimensions. Practically, the thread served as a marker identifying the scapegoat. Symbolically, the scarlet color represented sin. The choice of red wool resonates with broader ancient Near Eastern practices, where scarlet or dyed threads often signaled danger, impurity, or transgression.

The selection of scarlet wool is particularly significant because red-dyed wool frequently appears in ancient ritual contexts associated with purification and boundary-marking, thereby reinforcing the symbolic association between the color red and the presence of impurity requiring removal (Ayali-Darshan, 2020).

The connection between scarlet and sin reflects the prophetic imagery of Isaiah:

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow (Isa 1:18).

Rabbinic interpretation appears to apply this verse directly to the Yom Kippur ritual (m. Shabbat 9:3; m. Yoma 6:8; b. Yoma 67a).

This interpretive move exemplifies a characteristic hermeneutical pattern in rabbinic literature, in which prophetic texts are not merely cited but recontextualized within liturgical practice. The verse from Isaiah thus ceases to function solely as moral exhortation and becomes instead a scriptural anchor for ritual symbolism, effectively integrating prophetic theology into the experiential framework of Temple worship.

Later Mishnah passages describe how the scapegoat was taken to a cliff and pushed into the wilderness to ensure that it could not return (m. Yoma 6:6–8) (Tronina, 2006, pp. 248–249). This act further reinforced the finality of sin removal both symbolically and physically.

4. The Whitening of the Thread

A remarkable development in later rabbinic tradition is the belief that the scarlet thread miraculously turned white after the scapegoat ritual had been completed (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, p. 131; Rosen-Zvi, 2022, p. 25; Balberg, 2016, p. 33).

The Babylonian Talmud explains:

and when the goat reached the wilderness, it (i.e. the scarlet thread) turned white (b. Yoma 67a).

The narrative form of this passage is significant: rather than presenting the transformation as a doctrinal assertion, the Talmud embeds it within a quasi-descriptive account of ritual sequence. This literary strategy enhances its plausibility while simultaneously preserving its miraculous character, illustrating how rabbinic texts often negotiate the boundary between legal discourse and narrative theology.

This transformation symbolized the acceptance of Israel's atonement. At the same time, it rendered a theological claim a visible sign, making divine forgiveness perceptible and reinforcing communal trust in the ritual.

Some scholars interpret this tradition as a ritual concretization of prophetic symbolism, understood as transforming Isaiah's metaphor of scarlet sins becoming white into a dramatic liturgical sign perceptible to participants in the Temple ritual (Ayali-Darshan, 2020; Rosen-Zvi, 2022, pp. 118, 120).

The imagery reflects a broader biblical tradition in which whiteness symbolizes purification. Similar symbolism appears in Psalm 51:9 and Daniel 12:10.

In effect, the miracle translates theological abstraction into visual form, bringing together human perception and divine action.

5. Second Temple Context and the Dead Sea Scrolls

Although the scarlet thread is not explicitly mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls, several Qumran texts demonstrate a strong interest in the theology of Yom Kippur. These texts reflect a broader concern with purification, divine judgment, and ritual observance. However, scholars remain divided as to whether these documents can be directly linked to the Yom Kippur ritual. Such prayers are found in various sections of 1Q34, 4Q508, and 4Q509 (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, pp. 38, 41; Falk, 1998, pp. 165–169).

The Temple Scroll (11Q19) provides an expanded description of Temple rituals, reflecting a community profoundly concerned with cultic purity. It records that the high priest was required to wash his hands and feet to cleanse them of the blood from the sacrificial goat before approaching the scapegoat (11Q19 26:10) (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, p. 31).

The absence of the scarlet thread motif in earlier biblical and sectarian texts strengthens the argument that it emerged gradually during the Second Temple period as part of a broader tendency toward ritual elaboration (Ayali-Darshan, 2020). The Qumran community appears to have interpreted the Day of Atonement within a broader eschatological framework, in which the final purification of Israel would occur through divine intervention. This context highlights the dynamic theological reflection characteristic of Second Temple Judaism.

This development may be understood as reflecting a gradual movement toward the materialization of atonement, in which the otherwise invisible process of expiation becomes perceptible through tangible and communal signs.

6. The Tradition of the Forty Years

One of the most intriguing statements concerning the scarlet thread appears in the Babylonian Talmud:

(During all) forty years that Shimon HaTzaddik served (as High Priest), the lot (for God) arose in the right (hand). From then onward, sometimes it arose in the right (hand)

and sometimes it arose in the left. And the scarlet thread would turn white. From then onward, it sometimes turned white and sometimes it did not turn white [...] (but during) the forty years prior to the destruction of the Temple [...] the scarlet thread did not turn white (b. Yoma 39a–b).

This observation regarding the persistent failure of the sign is further corroborated and more precisely formulated in other parts of the Talmudic corpus:

Forty years before the Temple was destroyed the scarlet thread would not turn white; rather, it would turn red (b. Rosh HaShanah 31b).

The Talmud also mentions other signs that allegedly ceased during this period, including the failure of the western lamp of the menorah to remain lit:

[...] and the westernmost lamp (of the menorah) did not burn continually; and the doors of the Sanctuary would open of their own accord, until Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai rebuked³ them (b. Yoma 39b).

If the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, these traditions place the cessation of the miracle around 30 CE, thus creating a symbolic rather than strictly historical timeline.

Such retrospective traditions illustrate how later Jewish communities interpreted earlier ritual phenomena through the lens of theological reflection, thereby linking liturgical symbolism with historical memory and communal self-understanding (Ayali-Darshan, 2020).

In this respect, the rabbinic treatment of the scarlet thread aligns with a broader pattern in post-Temple Judaism, in which memory of the cult is not preserved as static tradition but dynamically reinterpreted to address new historical realities. The ritual is thus transformed into a site of theological reflection, where the loss of the Temple

3 The Hebrew root *n'r* suggests a forceful, almost violent rebuke or a physical shaking, contrasting with the typical *g'r* (to scold).

becomes an impetus for rearticulating the conditions of divine-human reconciliation.

The recurrence of the number forty emphasizes transition and testing, echoing well-established biblical patterns, such as the forty years of Israel in the wilderness and the forty days of Moses on Sinai (Exod 24:18; Num 14:33). The convergence of these traditions suggests that the chronological precision of “forty years” functions less as a historical report and more as a retrospective theological framework through which later communities interpreted the perceived loss of ritual efficacy.

7. Jewish Interpretations

Rabbinic interpretation consistently reorients the meaning of the ritual from its cultic performance toward its ethical and spiritual conditions. Within Jewish interpretation, the disappearance of the miracle was often understood as a sign of spiritual decline. Rabbinic literature frequently attributes the destruction of the Second Temple to internal moral failings, especially hatred and division among the people (b. Yoma 9b).

A key theme is that ritual efficacy depends upon ethical integrity. The most famous formulation of this idea appears in the Babylonian Talmud, which states that although the First Temple was destroyed because of idolatry, sexual immorality, and bloodshed, the Second Temple fell because of *śin’at ḥinnām* – “baseless hatred” among members of the Jewish community (b. Yoma 9b). In this interpretive framework, the cessation of the miraculous whitening of the scarlet thread can be understood as an external sign reflecting a deeper internal crisis within the moral and spiritual life of Israel.

Rabbinic commentators often interpreted the Yom Kippur ritual as a symbolic drama requiring genuine repentance (*t’sūbāh*). The Mishnah itself emphasizes that ritual observance alone cannot secure atonement if moral transformation is absent. This emphasis reflects a deliberate reconfiguration of sacrificial theology in the absence of the Temple, whereby the locus of atonement is progressively internalized. Rabbinic discourse does not abolish the symbolic framework of the ritual but

rather reinterprets it as a paradigm for ethical self-examination, thereby ensuring the continuity of its theological function beyond its original cultic setting.

A well-known statement declares that Yom Kippur atones for sins between a person and God, but not for sins committed against another person unless reconciliation is first sought (m. Yoma 8:9). Within this interpretive tradition, the scarlet thread may be seen as a visible indicator of whether the deeper ethical dimension of repentance had been fulfilled. This interpretation effectively relocates the center of atonement from ritual performance to ethical transformation, thereby marking a significant shift in theological emphasis.

This emphasis on inner transformation predates the Rabbinic era. For instance, the Book of Jubilees (5:17–18) already identifies repentance as a fundamental component of the Yom Kippur ritual. Furthermore, the specific term *tšûbāh* appears already in the Qumran literature, marking a significant linguistic and theological development (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, p. 132). In the period following the destruction of the Temple, when the physical sacrificial rites were no longer possible, the act of repentance gained even greater theological weight. It was elevated to a near-hypostatic status, being regarded as one of the primordial elements created before the foundation of the world (b. Pesahim 54a; b. Nedarim 39b) (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, p. 132).

Later rabbinic reflection also connected the symbolism of the thread with biblical prophetic traditions emphasizing inner moral renewal. In homiletical contexts (midrash), this connection is often expanded through associative interpretation, where the transformation of color becomes a metaphor not only for forgiveness but for ontological change in the moral state of the individual. Such readings suggest that the whitening of the thread was understood not merely as a sign of divine action, but as an indicator of a reciprocal process involving human repentance and transformation.

The prophetic declaration in Isaiah – “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow” (Isa 1:18) – was understood as describing the transformative effect of divine forgiveness when repentance is genuine. In rabbinic homiletical interpretation, the whitening of the

thread therefore functioned as a ritual enactment of this prophetic promise, rendering visible the process by which sin is transformed through repentance and divine mercy.

Medieval Jewish commentators continued to explore the symbolic meaning of the ritual. For example, commentators such as Nachmanides (Ramban) interpreted the scapegoat ceremony within a broader theological framework concerning the removal of impurity from the community and the restoration of covenantal order. While Ramban did not treat the scarlet thread in detail, later exegetical traditions often connected the symbolism of the thread with the broader dynamics of purification and expiation described in Leviticus.

In this interpretive context, the tradition that the thread ceased to turn white forty years before the destruction of the Temple acquired particular theological significance. Rather than being treated as a failure of ritual mechanics, this cessation is framed as a diagnostic sign within rabbinic thought – a visible symptom of a deeper rupture in the covenantal relationship. The absence of transformation thus becomes as meaningful as its presence, reinforcing the idea that divine forgiveness is contingent upon sustained ethical and communal integrity.

Rather than suggesting that the ritual itself had lost its validity, rabbinic interpreters tended instead to view the disappearance of the sign as a warning concerning the spiritual condition of the community. The miracle did not guarantee atonement automatically. Instead, it reflected the moral and spiritual state of Israel. When repentance weakened, the visible confirmation of forgiveness also disappeared.

Consequently, the rabbinic reception of this tradition reinforces a central theme of Jewish theology: ritual and ethics are inseparable. This synthesis is not merely theoretical but programmatic, shaping the development of post-Temple Judaism in which liturgical memory, scriptural interpretation, and ethical praxis converge. The scarlet thread, in this expanded interpretive horizon, functions as a micro-symbol of this integration, encapsulating the transition from external rite to internalized religious consciousness.

The liturgical drama of Yom Kippur achieves its purpose only when accompanied by genuine repentance, moral accountability, and

reconciliation within the community. In this sense, the scarlet thread became a powerful symbol not only of divine forgiveness but also of the ethical responsibility required to receive it.

8. Christian Interpretations

Early Christian writers interpreted the scapegoat ritual typologically. This hermeneutical approach does not aim at reconstructing the original meaning of the ritual but rather recontextualizes it within a christological framework. The Epistle to the Hebrews develops the most sophisticated theological interpretation of Yom Kippur within the New Testament. According to Hebrews, Christ functions as both high priest and sacrificial victim who enters the heavenly sanctuary once for all (Heb 9–10). In this interpretation, the sacrificial system of the Temple is understood as a symbolic precursor pointing toward the definitive act of redemption accomplished through the death and exaltation of Christ (Tronina, 2006, pp. 249–250; Łach, 1959, pp. 212–220; Malina, 2018, pp. 405–411).

This conjunction of priesthood and sacrifice reflects a fundamental principle of biblical sacrificial theology. In the cultic logic of Leviticus, blood possesses expiatory significance only insofar as it represents life that has been surrendered (Lev 17:11). Consequently, when the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the purifying power of Christ's blood (Heb 9:14), it presupposes the reality of a self-offering culminating in death rather than a merely symbolic or detached substance. The distinctiveness of Christ's priesthood lies precisely in this point: unlike the Levitical high priest, who enters the sanctuary with the blood of another, Christ enters "through his own blood" (Heb 9:12), that is, on the basis of his own self-offering. His priestly mediation is therefore inseparable from his identity as the offering itself. Within this framework, the categories of priest and victim are not juxtaposed but internally unified, since the efficacy of atonement depends on the presentation of a life that has been given over.

The typological interpretation of the scapegoat ritual became particularly prominent in early Christian exegesis. The Epistle of Barnabas,

a late first- or early second-century Christian text, offers one of the earliest explicit interpretations. In Barnabas 7, the scapegoat is described as a symbolic anticipation of the suffering of Christ (Tronina, 2006, p. 249; Balberg, 2016, p. 30; Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, pp. 147–155). The author interprets the sending of the goat into the wilderness as prefiguring the rejection and suffering of Jesus outside the city, thereby drawing a connection between the removal of sin in the Yom Kippur ritual and the redemptive suffering of Christ.

Justin Martyr likewise refers to the scapegoat as a symbolic anticipation of Christ's redemptive work. In his *Dialogue with Trypho* (40:4–5), Justin argues that the two goats described in Leviticus represent complementary aspects of the redemptive drama: one sacrificed and the other bearing sins away. Justin interprets these elements as prophetic symbols fulfilled in the suffering and death of Christ, thus emphasizing the idea that Christ bears the sins of humanity in a manner analogous to the scapegoat (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, pp. 155–156).

The Epistle to the Hebrews, although it does not explicitly mention the scapegoat, develops the theological logic underlying such interpretations. Hebrews portrays Christ as the ultimate high priest who enters not an earthly sanctuary but the heavenly one, offering his own blood as the definitive sacrifice for sin (Heb 9:11–14). Within this framework, the rituals of Yom Kippur – including the scapegoat – are understood as anticipatory symbols that foreshadow the ultimate act of atonement accomplished through Christ (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, pp. 180–186).

Some early Christian interpreters were also aware of Jewish traditions concerning the scarlet thread and occasionally incorporated the imagery of scarlet becoming white into theological reflection on the transformation of sin through divine forgiveness (Ayali-Darshan, 2020). In Christian theological reflection, the transformation from scarlet to white could thus be interpreted as a metaphor for the cleansing power of Christ's sacrifice, echoing the prophetic imagery of Isaiah 1:18 as well as New Testament passages emphasizing purification through the blood of Christ (cf. Rev 7:14).

Later Christian theologians continued to develop these themes. Early Christian writers, such as Origen (*Homily in Leviticus* 9:3:2) and

Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 3:5–24; *Against the Jews* 14:9–10), frequently interpreted Old Testament sacrificial rituals typologically, viewing them as symbolic foreshadowings of Christ's redemptive work (Balberg, 2016, p. 30; Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, pp. 156–158). Within this interpretive tradition, the scapegoat ritual became an especially powerful image of substitutionary atonement: the sins of the community are transferred to a representative figure who bears them away.

This typological approach is also evident in the works of Hippolytus of Rome. In a commentary found in the *Catenae* on Proverbs, Hippolytus interprets the “goat leading the flock” (Prov 30:31) as a dual representation of Christ, embodying both the sacrificial goat and the scapegoat. According to this view, Christ is the one who was sacrificed for the world's sins and subsequently sent out to the Gentiles, much like the goat dispatched into the wilderness. Notably, Hippolytus mentions that he was “crowned with scarlet wool” by unbelievers, a detail that strongly suggests an adaptation of the Yom Kippur imagery. While the brevity and poetic nature of this fragment make a precise comparative analysis challenging, the inclusion of the scarlet element clearly points to a developed Yom Kippur typology in early Christian thought (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, p. 158).

Within this framework, the rabbinic tradition concerning the scarlet thread was sometimes interpreted by Christian writers as evidence that the Temple sacrificial system had reached its culmination and fulfillment. Although such interpretations must be understood within the context of early Christian theological polemics, they illustrate how shared scriptural traditions generated divergent yet interconnected interpretive trajectories within Judaism and Christianity (Stökl Ben Ezra, 2003, pp. 212–225).

9. Theological Significance

The tradition of the scarlet thread demonstrates how ritual symbols can acquire new meanings over time through interpretation.

In its original context, the thread represented the sins of Israel placed upon the scapegoat. The whitening of the thread symbolized divine forgiveness.

From a comparative perspective, the motif of a thread absorbing impurity and being removed from the community reflects a broader ritual logic in which tangible objects function as carriers of symbolic pollution before being expelled, destroyed, or abandoned outside the social sphere (Ayali-Darshan, 2020).

The later tradition of the thread remaining red introduces a dramatic tension. The ritual continues, yet its visible confirmation disappears.

In Jewish thought, this tension often leads to deeper reflection on repentance and moral responsibility. In Christian interpretation, however, it is usually incorporated into a broader theological narrative concerning the fulfillment of sacrificial symbolism.

Conclusion

The scarlet thread tradition associated with the scapegoat ritual provides a significant example of the development of biblical symbolism within later Jewish and Christian thought.

While the biblical text of Leviticus 16 describes the essential structure of the Yom Kippur ceremony, rabbinic tradition enriched its symbolic meaning by introducing the motif of the scarlet thread turning white.

Modern comparative scholarship increasingly situates this motif within the wider ritual culture of the ancient Near East, where similar practices involving colored wool, cords, or symbolic objects were employed to remove impurity or misfortune from individuals and communities (Ayali-Darshan, 2020).

The claim that this sign ceased forty years before the destruction of the Temple generated diverse interpretations. Jewish commentators generally understood it as a sign of spiritual decline, whereas Christian interpreters often viewed it within a typological framework connected to the redemptive work of Christ.

Regardless of the interpretive perspective, even in its later forms, the scarlet thread continues to function as a striking symbol of the transition from sin to forgiveness. Its development demonstrates how ritual elements can acquire new meanings through successive layers

of interpretation, ultimately reflecting broader transformations in religious thought and practice, as well as the dynamic interaction between ritual, theology, and communal identity.

Ultimately, the development of the scarlet thread tradition illustrates not only the evolution of ritual symbolism but also the shifting ways in which communities sought to articulate the reality of atonement – whether through cultic signs, ethical transformation, or Christological fulfillment.

Abstract

The Scarlet Thread of Yom Kippur: The Scapegoat, the Whitening Sign, and Its Jewish and Christian Interpretations

The ritual of the scapegoat described in Leviticus 16 is one of the most distinctive elements of the Yom Kippur liturgy. Later Jewish tradition developed the biblical account by introducing the custom of attaching a scarlet thread or strip of scarlet wool (*lāšōn šel zehôrīt*, lit. tongue of scarlet) to the scapegoat. Rabbinic sources state that this thread miraculously turned white when Israel's atonement was accepted by God. Even more strikingly, the tradition preserved in the Babylonian Talmud claims that this sign ceased approximately forty years before the destruction of the Second Temple. This article explores not only the textual evidence but also the interpretive imagination that shaped the ritual over centuries. It examines the development of the scarlet thread motif, its theological symbolism, and the interpretive trajectories that it generated within Jewish and Christian traditions. Special attention is given to the meaning of the Hebrew term *'āzāzēl*, the ritual description preserved in the Mishnah, and to parallels found in Second Temple literature. Recent comparative research suggests that the motif of a ritual thread connected with the scapegoat may reflect a broader ritual pattern in the ancient Near East, in which cords, wool, or colored threads functioned as material carriers of transferred impurity or misfortune before being expelled from the community. Such parallels point to a shared cultural logic extending beyond the biblical text itself. The study argues that this motif represents a later ritual concretization of atonement and reflects broader shifts in theological interpretation across Jewish and Christian traditions.

Keywords: Yom Kippur, scapegoat, Azazel, scarlet thread, Second Temple, Judaism, rabbinic interpretation, early Christian typology, ritual symbolism

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