

*THE WORD "ATONE" IN EXTRA-RITUAL
LITERATURE.*

Two conceptions or modes of thinking of God run through the Old Testament. According to the one Jehovah is a righteous Ruler, a Judge and moral Governor of men and the world. Only moral offences are considered sin. These Jehovah punishes as a righteous Judge, or He forgives them of His mercy and goodness. In this aspect what characterizes Jehovah is righteousness. This conception prevails in all the extra-ritual literature.

In another aspect Jehovah is a person dwelling in a house, whom men approach in worship, a sensitive Being or Nature which sin disturbs. In this aspect what characterizes Jehovah is holiness, and all sin is regarded as uncleanness. But sin now embraces much more than moral offences: to touch a dead body is a sin, and that not because it is disobedience to a command forbidding contact with the dead, but because it is an act incurring uncleanness, which creates a disability in the worshipper on account of the reaction against it of the nature of the Being worshipped. These ceremonial observances, as they are called, are many of them very ancient, and they are of very various origins. Many of them, however, are religious in their origin, the acts that cause defilement having been acts done in rites rendered to other deities than Jehovah. It is altogether a misapprehension to suppose these so-called ceremonial defilements a mere manufactured and factitious symbolism, designed to suggest moral ideas. When their origin was forgotten, and men were far removed from the soil and conditions of thought out of which they arose, they may have served this use; but originally the uncleannesses were considered real, and the lustrations and sacrifices which purified them were equally real. As it was in con-

nection with the worship of God that the idea of His holiness was suggested, it was naturally in priestly circles that the idea was developed. This fact of itself makes it probable that the conception of God's holiness is not less ancient than that of His righteousness. And one may even go further and surmise that some of the laws in which the conception of holiness is expressed, such as Leviticus xvii. ff., may in point of antiquity not stand far below the earliest portions of the Old Testament, though, as we now possess them, they may be mixed with newer elements and overgrown with later developments. These two ways of regarding God—as righteous and as holy—are further interesting because they extend into the New Testament, the former appearing in St. Paul's writings, and the latter in the Epistle to the Hebrews. St. Paul is, in the main, the successor of the prophets, the writer to the Hebrews of the priestly legislators.

The word *atone* (כִּפֶּר) is employed both in the ritual and extra-ritual literature, though with considerable differences of usage.¹ The original physical sense of the word may be somewhat uncertain, as it is used in parallelism sometimes with words that signify *to cover*, and sometimes with words signifying *to blot out* or *obliterate*. For example, Jeremiah xviii. 23, "*Atone not* Thou their guilt, and *blot not out* their sin from before Thee," becomes in Nehemiah iii. 37 (E.V. iv. 5), "*Cover not* Thou their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from before Thee." It is probable, however, that the original sense of the term was *to cover*, as the common verb "to cover" (*kissah*) is so often used in the same way, as Psalm xxxii. 1, "Blessed is the man whose sin is covered" (*kesui*); Psalm lxxxv. 2, "Thou hast taken away the guilt of Thy people, Thou hast covered (*kissitha*) all their sin." It has been supposed by some that the verb

¹ In his little work, *Der Begriff der Sühne im Alten Testament*, Riehm made a full collection of the materials, and rightly estimated them.

atone is a denominative from the word *kopher*, "ransom for life" (cf. Job xxxiii. 24), but the idea lying under *kopher* was most likely that of a covering, and the suggested derivation adds nothing to our knowledge. The word *atone* or *cover*, however, is no more used in a literal sense, but always figuratively; it expresses an idea, a moral, not a physical, act. Even when blood atones or covers the uncleanness of a person or thing, or the unclean thing or person, the uncleanness or person is not physically covered by the blood laid on them, because the blood of atonement was chiefly applied to the altar and very rarely sprinkled upon a person or thing.

To atone was to cover, but the covering was not literal but figurative and ideal. Hence a more curious question arises: What was it that was supposed to be covered? Was it the offence, so that it was no more visible to the injured party, or, as the case might be, to the judge who had to take notice of it; or was it the face or eyes of the injured person or judge that were covered, so that he no more could see the offence? The usage seems to be various. When the question of wrong was one between men and men, the atonement or covering was usually a gift, and in this case it appears to be the eyes of the injured person or judge that are covered so that he does not see. Thus in Genesis xx. 16, Abimelech makes reparation to Sarah, saying, "Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is for thee a covering (*kesûth*) of the eyes." And in Genesis xxxii. 20, Jacob says, in regard to Esau, "I will atone (cover, *akapperah*) his face (R.V., appease him) with the present that goeth before me."¹ So in 1 Samuel xii. 3, Samuel asks, in regard to his conduct as judge, "Of whose hand have I taken a ransom (*kopher*), to blind mine eyes therewith?" as it is said in Exodus xxiii.

¹ Some would read "his anger" for "his face," cf. Proverbs xvi. 14. The change seems unnecessary.

8, "A gift blindeth them that have sight" (Deut xvi. 19). Possibly the rather obscure passage Job ix. 24 may express a similar idea, where, speaking of the wrongs done by men on each other, Job says, "The earth is given into the hands of the wicked; He covereth the faces of the judges thereof; if it be not He, who then is it?"

When men were injured, or when they had to judge a cause, their eyes might be covered by a gift, blinding them to the wrong, but reverence forbade such a mode of thought in regard to God: "The Lord your God, He is God of gods and Lord of lords, which regardeth not persons nor taketh a bribe" (Deut. x. 17). It may indeed be made a question what the primary idea of sacrifice was; if it was a gift to God, it might have been supposed to cover His eyes. Care, at any rate, was taken to obviate false ideas connected with it; for God is represented as saying, even in regard to the atoning blood, "I have given it to you upon the altar, to make atonement (*lekapper*) for your souls" (Lev. xvii. 11).

In the religious use of the word *kipper* in the extra-ritual literature, the subject who atones or covers is God Himself, and the object covered is the sin or offence. In this use the piel *kipper* must mean either "to declare covered" or "to hold covered." In many cases the figure of covering was no more present to the mind, and *kipper* was equivalent to *forgive*, e.g., Psalm lxxv. 3, "Iniquities prevail against us, as for our transgressions Thou wilt forgive them"; Psalm lxxviii. 38, "But He being full of compassion forgave their iniquity" (Ps. lxxix. 9; Ezek. xvi. 63). The idea, however, of covering the sin, so that it was no more visible, was very apt to recur and appear in the parallelism; hence such figures as "blot out from Thy sight" (Jer. xviii. 23), cast the sin behind the back (Isa. xxxviii. 17), cast it into the depths of the sea (Mic. vii. 19), and frequently "cover" it; as, on the other hand, the Psalmist complains, "Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee,

our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance" (Ps. xc. 8). It is always the sin or offence that is the object of *kipper*, not the offending persons; if the persons be alluded to, the act is done *for* or *in behalf* of them (Deut. xxi. 8; Ezek. xvi. 63; 2 Chron. xxx. 18; in the last passage the division of verses is quite wrong).

As it is God Himself who performs the act expressed by *kipper*, no question of *means* can arise. In the extra-ritual literature sacrifice is never the means. In none of the prophets, not even Ezekiel, is the sin of the people forgiven through sacrifice. In Isaiah liii. perhaps the sacrificial idea appears, though it is lifted up into the region of human life. In one passage, 1 Samuel iii. 14, an allusion is made to sacrifice which appears strange: "I have sworn that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned with sacrifice nor offering for ever." Might it not be permissible to render, "that the iniquity of Eli's house in (regard to) sacrifice and offering shall not be atoned for ever"? (cf. chap. ii. 11-17, etc.; Isaiah xxii. 14). There is another passage also of interest, 1 Samuel xxvi. 19, where David says to Saul, when remonstrating with him for his persecution of him, "If it be the Lord that hath stirred thee up against me, let Him smell an offering." David regards Saul's persecution of him as due to some aberration or frenzy of mind. It is possible that it is the Lord who has struck him with this aberration. If so, it is in chastisement of some inadvertent or unremembered sin of which he has been guilty. Therefore for this let him offer a sacrifice that the Lord may remove the stroke from him. This is, however, just the proper use of sacrifice, viz., for sins of inadvertency.

In several passages the idea of sacrifice has been found where it is really not present. One instance is Deuteronomy xxi. 8. This was the case where the body of a murdered person was discovered, without its being possible to trace the murderer. The elders of the city nearest to which

the body was found were to take an unblemished heifer, never subjected to the yoke, bring her to a valley with running water, and there slay her by breaking her neck. The elders were then to wash their hands over the heifer and protest their innocence: "Our hands have not shed this blood! And they were to pray, "Atone, O Lord, for Thy people Israel; suffer not innocent blood to remain in the midst of Thy people. And the blood shall be atoned or covered to them." This was no sacrifice, but a symbolical judicial action. That the animal was not a sacrifice is certain from the fact that her neck was broken. By the murder guilt of blood was brought on the land, which of right could be removed only by the death of the murderer (Num. xxxv. 30). In this case he could not be found, and a symbolical execution was performed, which, illustrating the principles of the law, was held sufficient. A similar, though more painful and tragic, instance occurs in 2 Samuel xxi. A famine of three years afflicted the land in David's days, and on inquiring the cause at the oracle he was answered, "There is blood upon Saul and on his house, because he put to death the Gibeonites." [The narrative then explains that the Gibeonites were not Israelites, but of the remnant of the Amorites; but the children of Israel had sworn to them to spare them (Josh. ix.), and Saul sought to slay them in his zeal for Israel.] Receiving this answer, David turned to the Gibeonites, asking, "By what means shall I make atonement (akapperah), that ye may bless the heritage of the Lord?" The Gibeonites refuse to accept a blood-wit of money. They intimate also that they have no quarrel with the people of Israel, only with Saul and his house: "The man who consumed us, and who thought to destroy us, that we should not remain in all the border of Israel, let seven men of his sons be given us, and we will hang them up unto Jehovah." Their request was granted. To some minds the whole transaction will seem

a dreadful instance of sanguinary superstition. However it be looked at, it is evident that David acted with perfect integrity, deferring, as he always did, to the religious authorities. And perhaps something might be said even on the question of superstition, which, if it existed, would lie in connecting the famine with Saul's breach of the oath and covenant with the Gibeonites. The point, however, is that the slaughter of Saul's sons was not a sacrifice, but an execution. It may be doubtful whether the phrase "before Jehovah" (*v.* 9) should be taken locally, meaning, in the vicinity of the sanctuary, or, ideally, unto Jehovah, in recognition of His law (*cf. v.* 6). Saul's offence was not merely that of the common manslayer, it was breach of the covenant and oath to the Gibeonites lying on Israel, and the story illustrates the inviolable sanctity of the oath in early times (*comp. the story of Jonathan, 1 Sam. xiv. 24 ff.*). At all events, bloodguiltiness lay on the land because of Saul's deed, and as the guilty person was no more amenable himself he was made amenable in his descendants.

As in the extra-ritual literature it is God Himself who "atones" sin, while there is no question of means, there may be a question of motive. Naturally the motives will usually be found within Himself, in His own nature and attributes, or in His consideration of His operations in redemption already wrought. The effect of sin upon the mind of Jehovah, whatever the sin was, whether idolatry, injustice, or disobedience, was to arouse His anger. The Divine anger is not an attribute like righteousness. Anger in God is what it is in men, an affection, and is transient. The Divine nature is capable of wrath, though God is slow to anger. Then the natural result of anger is punishment of the wrongdoer. But as anger is but an affection and not the fundamental character of the Divine mind, which rather is longsuffering and compassion, this prevailing disposition may restrain the anger so that no punishment follows, but

forgiveness. Thus in Psalm lxxviii. 38 it is said: "They (the people) were not faithful in His covenant; but He being full of compassion forgave their iniquity and destroyed them not; yea, many a time turned He His anger away and stirred not up all His wrath, for He remembered that they were flesh." Very often God is represented as restraining His anger "for His name's sake." The phrase is a late one, and epitomizes past redemptive history. It refers to Jehovah's revelation of Himself within Israel, to His great deeds done as God of Israel on the stage of history, deeds done in the eyes of the nations, and a beginning at least of His revelation of Himself to them. Consideration of this redemptive work already begun, with the purpose that through Israel it should reach all the nations, restrains His anger against Israel. In the poem, Deuteronomy xxxii. 26, it is said: "I would make the remembrance of them (Israel) cease from among men were it not that I feared the provocation of the enemy; lest their adversaries should misdeem, lest they should say, Our hand is exalted." In Ezekiel xx. the whole course of Israel's history is explained on this principle. That which has prolonged the existence of Israel and given it a history is Jehovah's regard for His own name. And when the prophets of the exile, who had hoped that Israel's trials would turn their hearts to God, see themselves disappointed, they fall back on this idea: "For Mine own sake do I defer Mine anger, that I cut thee not off. I have refined thee, but not as silver. For Mine own sake do I do it; for how should My name be profaned?" (Isa. xlvi. 9 ff.). The redemptive purpose and historical progress made already towards fulfilling it may contain many details, such as the fact that Israel is His people, whom He has redeemed, His love to their forefathers, the care that the knowledge of Him which has begun to flow upon the nations should not suffer a recession or backset, and other things. Thus in Deuteronomy ix.

26 Moses prays: "O Lord God, destroy not Thy people and Thine inheritance which Thou hast redeemed. Remember Thy servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Let not Egypt say, Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land which He promised them, therefore He slew them in the wilderness. Yet they are Thy people and Thine inheritance." A similar circle of ideas appears in Exodus xxxii. 10 and Numbers xiv. 11: "And now let the power of the Lord be great, according as Thou hast spoken: the Lord is slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. Pardon, I pray Thee, the iniquity of this people according to Thy mercy. And the Lord said, I pardon according to thy word."

Another point is this, illustrated in the history of the people in the wilderness, and in all the prophets. In the period of the Exodus the anger of the Lord expressed itself in plagues, and in the prophetic age in the people's subjugation by the nations and exile from their own land. Yet a full end was not made of the people: "The eyes of the Lord are upon the sinful kingdom to destroy it, saving that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob" (Am. ix. 8). The point here is that the righteous anger of Jehovah displayed and illustrated itself. It received so far a certain satisfaction. He did not stir up all His wrath nor make a full end of the nation, which might have been the natural issue of their disobedience, but His righteousness was shown and His rule vindicated. In His returning mercy He might even feel that His chastisements had been too heavy: "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (Isa. xl. 2).

Though the motives to Jehovah's "atoning" or forgiving sin be chiefly found in Himself or in the respect which He has to His redemptive purpose with mankind and the beginnings of it already made, a few cases occur where human intercession is had respect to by Him. The in-

stance of Abraham's entreaties for Sodom is the most remarkable in early history. Lower down Amos (ch. vii.) represents himself as interceding for the people. Preparations for destroying Israel were shown him, and he prayed: "O Lord, forgive I beseech Thee; how shall Jacob stand? for he is small. And the Lord said, It shall not be." Jeremiah frequently intercedes for the people, though both to Him and to Ezekiel the intimation is given that the time for intercession is past: "Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, my mind could not be toward this people; cast them out of my sight" (Jer. xv. 1). In the wilderness, when the people made the golden calf, Moses interceded with effect, though the Lord had said: "This is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let Me alone that My anger may wax hot against them and that I may consume them; and I will make of thee a great nation" (Exodus xxxii.); and also on other occasions when the people murmured (Num. xiv. 14). On these occasions Moses identifies himself with the people, devotedly refusing life to himself if they are to perish. He also profoundly feels and acknowledges the people's sin, and his acknowledgment, from the relation which he assumes to them, may be considered their confession. His confession and intercession prevail with God, and it is in reference to them, no doubt, that Moses says beforehand to the people, "Peradventure I may 'atone' (akapperah) for your sin" (Exod. xxxii. 30).

There is an interesting passage in Numbers xxv. The case is that of the sin of Israel with the Midianitish women. Phinehas seeing an Israelite prince bring in a Midianitish woman for purposes of fornication, thrust them both through with a dart. And the Lord said: "Phinehas hath turned My wrath away from the children of Israel, in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I consumed them not in My jealousy. Therefore I give unto him My covenant of peace because he was jealous for his God and

'atoned' (wayekapper) for the children of Israel." Here it is the zeal of Phinehas that atones, his zeal expressing itself in the act of vengeance upon the sinners. It does so because it is the zeal of Jehovah. Phinehas enters into Jehovah's mind, acts in His mind, and thereby magnifies and sanctifies Him. This atones.

The comparison of these passages in the extra-ritual literature speaking of atonement and forgiveness may not seem to yield much result. There may be other passages which would suggest additional thoughts. In those cited the chief points are these :

God alone forgives sin and covers it. To cover or "atone" sin, when said of God, is a mere figure for "forgive." Frequently the figure is no more present to the mind, though it is very liable to recur and be introduced in the context.

Though sin provokes the anger of God, anger is with Him but a passing emotion ; as the Psalmist says, His anger is but for a moment (Ps. xxx. 5). The prevailing attribute of His nature is mercy, and on penitence and confession He is ready to forgive : " I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord, and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin " (Ps. xxxii. 5).

Motives to forgiveness which God finds in Himself are many : His compassion, His memory of His former servants the fathers—" for my servant David's sake," respect to His covenant, and for His own name's sake, the last motive embracing many particulars and considerations of the widest kind.

The wrath called forth by the sin of individuals or His people often expresses itself in plagues and, in the prophetic age, in the humiliation of the people under the nations and in exile. Thus His righteous anger receives a certain satisfaction ; it is displayed, as is said in Isaiah v. 16, " He is magnified in judgment, and sanctified in righteousness."

His nature is revealed. His righteousness is declared or shown (Rom. iii. 25).

In another way satisfaction is rendered to Him (if the phrase may be used), and His anger is appeased, viz., when men enter into His just resentment, and feeling it act in His mind; as when the Levites intervened to chastise the people for their idolatry in worshipping the calf, or when Phinehas was jealous with the jealousy of the Lord and executed judgment.

God's anger is also turned away and sin covered or "atoned" by the intercession of His nearest servants. There is a solidarity between these men and the people. Their confession of the people's sin is the people's confession, and their mind the people's mind. And yet they are different, innocent of the people's guilt. They are near to God. He has respect to them. Their intercession usually sets before God the motives in Himself from which He acts, His compassion, and all the great considerations expressed in the phrase "His name's sake," His gracious purpose of making Himself, who is God alone, known to all mankind, and the historical acts to that end already done.

Finally, the question may be suggested, What approach is made in these points, or in some of them, towards the New Testament doctrine?

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