ATONEMENT PATTERNS IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE
REBELLIOUS SONS, SCAPEGOATS AND BOY SUBSTITUTES

Michael Carden, *University of Queensland*

The paper gives an overview of Atonement ritual patterns and symbolism before examining how Atonement elements are played out in certain biblical narratives. I survey a number of narratives from Genesis, Joshua, Judges and 1 Samuel before exploring the atonement patterns in the 2 Samuel story of the rebellion and death of Absalom. The Day of Atonement was not unique to the 'Israelite' Temple/s. While I believe 'Israel' had its own unique understanding of Atonement, 'Israelite' Temple symbolism, rituals and motifs are derived from and are part of a broader family of Middle Eastern Temple theologies and practice. Atonement is related to the New Year and world renewal, celebrating the divine overcoming of Chaos e.g Marduk vs Tiamat, El/Athirat vs Yam/Leviathan, Baal vs Yam & Mot, YHWH vs Yam/Leviathan(/Azazel?). Over 30 years ago, Rictor Norton identified a homo-erotic element in such mythologies and associated sacrificial rituals. My reading of Atonement patterns in the Absalom narrative highlights such homo-erotic possibilities.

INTRODUCTION

For some time now I have been struck by the notion of the Temple as the great repressed of biblical studies. This impression developed in conjunction with my research on the biblical background of Marian motifs.[1] I have come to appreciate the centrality of Temple themes and motifs in underpinning and shaping the texts and narratives of the Hebrew and associated scriptures (including the ideas and imagery of subsequent Mariology). The most important ritual event of the Temple calendar was the Day of Atonement, described in Leviticus 16. Leviticus is a utopian text and its description of the Atonement rituals is no doubt an idealised one. Nevertheless when put beside other descriptions and references to Atonement rituals e.g. in the Mishnah, Epistle of Barnabas, and atonement rituals elsewhere in the Middle East, ritual patterns can be recognized and further identified as structuring biblical narratives.

In this essay, I explore the Day of Atonement rituals and motifs found in Leviticus 16 to identify ritual patterns that make up its dynamic. I then go on to examine the way these patterns are utilized in biblical narrative – primarily the rebellion of Absalom against David recounted in 2 Samuel 15-18. The biblical Day of Atonement is part of a broader family of Ancient Middle Eastern Temple rituals associated with the New Year and equinox. In his *The Homosexual Literary Tradition* published in 1974, the gay scholar, Rictor Norton, gave a homosexual reading of such rituals and I draw on his reading to sketch a homo-erotic ritual dimension underpinning the Absalom narrative and reflect on some possible implications of the atonement pattern and this homo-erotic dimension for biblically based religions today.

ATONEMENT – RITUALS AND PATTERNS

Deborah Rooke observes that amongst scholars the biblical Day of Atonement is 'one of the most widely discussed … ceremonies of ancient Judaism' (Rooke 2007, 342). Comprising part of the New Year rituals at the autumnal equinox, the Day of Atonement is most striking for the

lack of an apparent mythical base and framework in contrast to the great festival of the spring equinox, Passover, which is grounded in the Exodus narrative. Leviticus 16 provides details of the rituals to be performed by Aaron as high priest on the Day of Atonement in the Tabernacle. Further prescriptions are found in Lev. 23.23-25, while a variant of the sacrificial order is found in Num 29.7-11. The Qumran temple Scroll also provides another account of the ritual. A very detailed account of the Day of Atonement rituals is found in the Mishnah, Tractate Yoma but again no mythological basis is provided. Jubilees links Day of Atonement to the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37 'on the tenth of the seventh month, once a year for their sins; for they had grieved the affection of their father regarding Joseph his son' (34.18). Epistle of Barnabas 7 draws heavily on Day of Atonement ritual motifs applying them to Jesus and the crucifixion. Hebrews also seems to be drawing on Day of Atonement themes in its Christology. In contrast, Deuteronomy makes no reference whatsoever to the Day of Atonement. It would appear that, in its retelling of Torah, a Deuteronomistic religion has no place for the Day of Atonement.

I want to offer an overview of the Day of Atonement rituals as recounted in Leviticus and where necessary supplement this account with materials drawn from the Mishnah, Barnabas and other texts. The ritual begins with the high priest (or Aaron in the Leviticus account) first taking a young bull for 'a sin offering' and a ram for 'a sin offering' (Lev. 16.3). He then takes two male goats 'for a sin offering' (Lev. 16.5). According to both the Mishnah and Barnabas the goats were to be identical in every way (Yoma 5.6; Barnabas 6.7,12). The high priest casts lots on the two goats, 'one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel' (Lev. 16.8). Next, the bull is slaughtered 'as a sin offering' for the high priest and to 'make atonement for himself and for his house' (Lev. 16.11). The high priest then goes 'inside the curtain' (Lev. 16.12) into the Holy of Holies, bearing incense, a censer and the blood of the bull. The incense is burned on the censer 'before the LORD' (Lev. 16.13) while the blood of the bull is sprinkled before the mercy seat seven times. In the next stage the high priest slaughters the goat allotted to the LORD and takes the blood into the Holy of Holies, where it too is sprinkled upon and before the mercy seat. The high priest then comes out of the Holy of Holies. He takes the blood of both the bull and the goat and puts it 'on the horns of the altar' (Lev. 16.18). Then, using his finger, he sprinkles the altar with the blood seven times.

After completing the atonement of the Temple, the high priest then goes and lays his hands on the other goat and confesses over it 'all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat' (Lev. 16.20). The goat is then led away, and sent into the wilderness to Azazel (the bodies of the slaughtered bull and the goat meanwhile are to be burnt 'outside the camp' (Lev. 16.27)). According to Barnabas, the goat whose blood is used to atone the Temple, was eaten by the priests with vinegar (Barnabas 6.4). Similarly, the Mishnah suggests that if the Day of Atonement occurred on a Friday the slaughtered goat was eaten raw by some of the priests (Mishnah Menahoth 11.5). Another detail added by Barnabas is that scarlet wool is placed on the head of the goat for Azazel and that it is pricked and spat upon while being led away. According to the Mishnah, a strip of crimson wool was tied to the goat's head and, while it was not spat upon or pricked, the goat's hair was pulled by the people as it was lead through the Jerusalem streets (Yoma 4.2, 6.4). Rather than being set free in the wilderness, the goat was instead to be thrown over a cliff outside the city (Yoma 6.6).[2]

Aside from the high priest, there are three principal characters in this drama, the two goats and the bull. I will return to the bull later but now I am interested in the goats which are identical. One is sent out into the wilderness while the other, like the bull, is slaughtered in the Temple. The goats represent a clear pattern of one sent away and one remaining/slaughtered. But what is the significance of this pattern – what do the two goats represent and why is one killed and one sent away? The description of the goats, one 'for the LORD' and the other 'for Azazel', should provide a clue. Indeed most discussions of the Day of Atonement, referred to by Rooke, concern the question of what Azazel represents. There are three interpretations given of the word 'azazel' – functional, destinational, and supernatural. While I favor the third I don't see these possibilities as mutually exclusive but rather indicative of a multi-layered plurality of meanings embedded in the text:

Functional:

Most common is the sense of departure from two Hebrew words `z (goat) 'zl (departing), or as Mary Douglas puts it the go-away goat (2004:41). This is the sense of the LXX translation and of the Vulgate.

Destinational:

`z'zl is the goat's destination and means a 'rough and difficult place' or 'precipice' This sense is found in rabbinic literature including the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Lev 16.10. By employing the destinational sense `z'zl is sometimes seen as cognate with Dudael, the place in the wilderness where Raphael fetters Asael (1 En 10:4) (see more below) and this brings me to the third and most controversial interpretation.

Supernatural:

At question is how to read the word azazel. Is it `z'zl as in the MT or should it be read as `zz'l – Azaz'el, referring to a supernatural being? While most Hebrew manuscripts use the former, the Samaritan Torah uses the latter in Lev 16.10 (De Roo 2000, 236). The Temple Scroll account and other Qumran paraphrases of Leviticus use the latter (ibid., Pinker 2007, 3). The Peshitta uses Azazael (Pinker 2007, 3). Furthermore there are rich Jewish traditions of a demonic figure Azazel (Pinker 2007, 4–5) who is identified with the Asael of 1 Enoch 6-11, one of the angelic beings who come to earth to corrupt humanity in the days before the Flood. In fact on a number of occasions in the Greek and Ethiopic texts of 1 Enoch a version of the name Azazel is used instead of Asael (Knibb 1978, 71).[3]

The Enochian story of the angels who came down to earth is actually a combination of two stories. In one, a group of angels led by Shemihazah lust after human women and come down to earth to have sex with them. From these unions come the race of giants whose depredations of the earth prompt the divine intervention via the flood. In the other story, Asael – El makes – comes to earth and teaches humans a range of (forbidden?) knowledges which again leads to depredation of the earth that is finally set right by the flood. Meanwhile, Asael is bound and buried in a pit beneath a pile of stones by Raphael (recalling somewhat the fate of the azazel goat in the Mishnah). This story is fragmentary and is almost absorbed by the Shemihazah narrative.

Tawil (1980), Wyatt (1976) and others have identified Azazel with the Canaanite Mot or Attar respectively. Tawil and, more recently, De Roo (2000) have further argued that the name derives from a theophoric personal name meaning something like El's power or El's ferocity.

While not necessarily excluding the former hypothesis, Zatelli (1998) argues that it is the name of an old Canaanite demon and that the Masoretic text has changed the spelling to obscure this fact. On the Day of Atonement, one goat is offered to the Lord and one is sent out to the demon in the desert. However this interpretation raises the often, to some, shocking question, what is an offering to a Canaanite demon/deity doing in an erstwhile monotheistic text?

While acknowledging that Leviticus is a monotheistic text, I would nonetheless question whether its understanding of monotheism would be the same as that of our own time. More importantly, I agree with Mary Douglas (2000) that Leviticus is a utopian text i.e. it is not a descriptive or even prescriptive text; it is a transformative text. In other words, Leviticus is not describing a real world but an ideal world and is bringing that ideal to bear on its audience to reconstruct their actual world. That being said, Milgrom (1991: 1071–1079) and others locate the Day of Atonement in Leviticus within a spectrum of ancient Middle Eastern rites of purgation. A number of these are related to the New Year ceremonies including the annual rites of enthronement and validation of the monarch. That the Day of Atonement belongs to this broader religious spectrum is apt. I consider the biblical texts to represent a project of transformation of the older 'Israelite' religion/s, particularly the royal cults, into a new suite of religions, which are in some sense monotheistic. While Deuteronomy apparently abolishes the Day of Atonement, Leviticus retains and transforms it. Mary Douglas infers that atonement is, in fact, the central theme of Leviticus (Douglas 2000: 231–234).

Apart from the issue of transformation, I now want to adress the question: what is going on in this ritual? Margaret Barker has argued that rather than reading the goats as chosen 'for' the LORD and Azazel in Lev. 16.8, the Hebrew preposition *l* can also be read to mean 'as' the LORD or 'as' Azazel. In other words, the goats *represent* the LORD and Azazel respectively (2007: 180). In the ritual, the high priest likewise represents the LORD who comes from the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to heal or make atonement for the cosmos. Blood is life (Lev. 17.11, 14) and it is the LORD's life power that is used for this healing – 'the Day of Atonement ritual was the LORD offering himself to renew the creation' (Barker 2007: 180) – that blood is supplied by the slaughtered goat. The Azazel goat thus represents the wrath or ferocity of El. The incident when Moses and Aaron take their censers and interpose themselves between the people and the wrath of the LORD (Num. 16:41-50) is relevant here in that they make atonement to prevent the resulting outbreak of plague spreading amongst the people (c.f. Wisdom 18.20-25). In a similar way, the Azazel goat is sent away into the wilderness as part of the cosmic healing the Day of Atonement represents. It is worth noting that in 1 Enoch, Raphael – El heals – binds and inters Azazel in the wilderness. The Mishnah states that both goats were to be identical in every respect, while Barnabas (and later Justin Martyr and Tertullian) sees both goats as a type of Christ. The theophoric nature of the name Azazel, suggests a quality of El. Azazel is a demonic figure in the Apocalypse of Abraham in contrast to the angelic figure Yahoel, the latter clearly an aspect of the LORD/YHWH. If both the LORD and Azazel are related to each other, representing qualities of El then the fact that, in the Atonement rituals, a bull is slaughtered and its blood used together with the blood of the goat may recall a time when it was the great Bull, Father El, who alone made atonement each year rather than (with/through?) the LORD. In a strict sense, then, the Day of Atonement is not an expiatory sacrificial ritual at all, but one that, through a series of substitutions and identifications, transforms sacrificial forms into a rite of cosmic healing.

I now want to address the potential narrative patterns of the Day of Atonement. At its very simplest we have here a ritual pattern of three inter-related figures. There are the two goats, both identical, one of which is sent out while the other dies and/or is transformed. The third figure is the high priest who slaughters the goat that stays behind. If we read the slaughtered goat as representing, rather than being for, the LORD then it is also identified with the high priest who is also identified with/represents the LORD in the ritual. In a layer of substitutions the slaughtered goat dies in place of the high priest to provide the blood or life force, to be used by the high priest, as earthly manifestation of the LORD, to ritually heal the cosmos. By reading the Azazel goat supernaturally we further gain the strong sense of the divine wrath being sent away that it represents as well as the imagery of its fate of being bound or interred in the wilderness. Furthermore, the recognition of the Day of Atonement as belonging to or derived from a broad suite of New Year enthronement and validation rituals adds a further dimension – that of the Chaoskampf mythologies best typified by the Ugaritic Baal cycle and the Babylonian Enuma Elish and which provide a wealth of imagery and motifs in the biblical texts themselves. Thus behind the two goats can stand the enthroned deity and the (sea) monster that was defeated to form the world. It must be also recognised that these patterns are not applied mechanically in biblical texts but are instead creatively adapted by the authors to shape a wide variety of narratives.

Thus Day of Atonement patterns have been identified in the story of Cain and Abel (c.f. Douglas 2004: 56, who critiques this application), in which the high priest has been subsumed by the LORD and which, through Cain's murder of Abel, retains aspects of the Chaoskampf mythology. Behind Jacob and Esau likewise stand the two goats but in this case it is Jacob who initially has to leave after deceiving his father, Isaac, by using the skins (and most likely the meat) of a goat. Ultimately it will be Esau however who will be sent out of the land. As mentioned above, Jubilees links the story of Joseph and his brothers to the Day of Atonement. Interestingly, in the Genesis narrative, Joseph both 'dies' and is sent out of the land and at the same time a goat dies in place of Joseph.[4] One narrative has a long history of association with and interpretation through the Day of Atonement – the binding of Isaac. Isaac and Ishmael respectively are the goat that is slaughtered and the goat sent out into the wilderness, while behind Abraham stands the high priest. Even the place where Isaac is sacrificed is identified in Jewish and Christian traditions with the Temple mount itself. Thus the binding of Isaac underpins the very Temple and its rituals of atonement (Barker 1996: 67–69, Sherwood 2004: 833).

Mythologically, the fate of Achan in Joshua 7 recalls that of Asael/Azazel in 1 Enoch 10. Both are buried under a pile of stones. In both rabbinic and Islamic tradition, too, Achan is identified through the casting of lots, again recalling the lots cast to determine which goat represents Azazel and which the LORD. Crispin Fletcher-Lewis (1997) has argued that the vision of the Son of Man and Ancient of Days in Daniel is derived from the high priest entering into the Holy of Holies amidst clouds of incense on the Day of Atonement. The Exodus narrative itself draws richly on Atonement imagery. At its most basic it fits the Chaoskampf pattern – the LORD and Pharaoh are the adversaries here with ultimate victory going to the LORD in a sea battle. Moses has a high priestly role as the LORD's representative – he is actually described as being made godlike to Pharaoh. The Israelites themselves are eventually expelled into the wilderness, the go away goat, but only after the divine wrath slays the Egyptian first born. The Israelites are preserved from this wrath by the blood of lambs smeared on their doorways. Ezekiel's vision of

the restored Temple and its rituals seems to blur distinctions between Passover and Day of Atonement (45.18-25). This blurring underlines the fact that both Passover and Day of Atonement are equinoctial observances and are associated with the beginning of the year, the 'secular' and 'sacred' years respectively.

HYLAS, THE SACRIFICIAL BOY SURROGATE

As I said earlier, the Day of Atonement is part of a suite of rituals found throughout the ancient Middle East associated with New Year and royal enthronement and validation rites. At this point I want to take a walk on the wild side by turning to Rictor Norton's reading of the Hylas myth in relation to such rituals and the Chaoskampf mythologies that accompany them.

Rictor Norton's *The Homosexual Literary Tradition* (1974) is a fascinating study of a homosexual lyric pattern from classical Greek and Roman poetry through to the poetry of the Elizabethan Renaissance. Norton grounds his study in what I would term a queer reading of Fraser's *Golden Bough* and subsequent literature of the myth and ritual school, in particular, Theodor Gaster's *Thespis* (1975, first published 1950). Drawing on the story of Hylas and Herakles, Norton argued that ancient tribal kings did not always sacrifice themselves in seasonal rituals of renewal. Instead, they often made use of a boy surrogate. Reading the Hylas narrative as found in two ancient accounts, Apollodorus' Argonautica and Theocritus' Idylls (13 and 22) (and drawing largely on Gaster's seasonal pattern for myth and ritual), Norton (1974: 5–19) hypothesized a 5 act ritual drama, in which a boy is sacrificed following a ritual combat with the king and then eaten in a concluding feast. Norton argued too that as part of the combat the king would rape the boy before killing him. In Norton's schema, the ritual began with the king lamenting as the boy was taken away by the priests of the goddess. Later the boy, being liturgically reconfigured as the monstrous (the ritual underpinning of all the Chaoskampf monsters such as Tiamat, Leviathan, Yam etc), would then be returned to face combat with the king, at which time he would be raped by the king before being killed. Over time the ritual killing of the boy was replaced by castration or circumcision of the boy or the killing of a substitute animal. Likewise rape was supplanted by voluntary sexual union between the king and the boy. In time, the boy would be 'officially appointed as a permanent part of the royal household' even 'as a temporary king' as in the Persian festival Sacea (Norton 1974: 18). Norton argued that the king's rape of the boy was the origin of sacred marriage, which, in reality celebrated the restoration of the king's phallic fecundating power – the sexual union of king and boy representing the reunion of the king and his phallus. Ironically, given his victim status, the boy thus represented the king's penis. Consequently, Norton argued the priority of homosexual love over heterosexual love (while prior to both is maternal love). The lyrics of heterosexual love were first composed for homosexual love and subsequently appropriated into heterosexual love lyric. Norton maps this appropriation in his study of classical and Renaissance literature.

Further important features of Norton's hypothesis are transformation and transgenderism. Liturgically/mythologically the boy is transformed into a monster to be rendered the king's equal (or worse) in an essentially unequal transaction. Norton speculates that in the earliest ritual one actor played the parts of king, goddess and, later, boy substitute. One would become two, the sacrifice being the king's self-castration in flight from the Goddess (as per the Attis myth). The king then becomes sacred king and high priest and following a further split there appears the

boy substitute (the severed genitals of the king?). The boy substitute is himself split between the sacred son and the monstrous double who is killed or expelled. Such repetition and doubling not only applies to characters in the myth but eventually to ritual events and narrative sequences. Parallel figures generate parallel narratives. A single component of the ritual generates a plethora of stories.

Norton's second point concerns the gender blurring or androgyny in the myth. The boy substitute not only represents the king's virility, he also, as 'a rebirth principle', has a 'female role and would be seen as the surrogate of the fertility of the Great Mother or vegetation goddess' (Norton 1974: 18). In part, this feminine role may derive from the passive victim status of the boy as sacrifice. As the original victim, the king himself shares this female role, which in the process of doubling/splitting results in the Goddess herself and high priestess as characters in the myth ritual. This gender blurring is further highlighted by crossdressing as evidenced by the eunuch crossdressed priesthoods of the ancient world.

What I find valuable in Norton's hypothesis is that he allows for the place of the erotic, particularly the homo-erotic, in sacrifice and ritual together with the gender fluidity of many ancient rites and priesthoods. I am also attracted by his account of the homosexual origins of sacred marriage. I have long been struck by the sense that there is something rather queer about sacred marriage, that it isn't really heterosexual at all. Norton shows how it fits the gender dynamics of sacrifice and the homo-erotics of the sacrificial boy surrogate. Furthermore, even though the biblical accounts of Day of Atonement have no erotic component subsequent rabbinic traditions strongly associate the Day of Atonement with sacred marriage imagery. According to the Talmud, in Jerusalem it was customary to choose brides on the Day of Atonement (Gaster 1975: 42). Furthermore, according to the Zohar when the high priest entered Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement

> … he heard the voice of the wings of the cherubim being lifted up for intercourse.
> When the wings subside the cherubim copulate calmly (Weinfeld 1996: 518).

This image of the copulating cherubim derives from the Talmud where it is said:

> Whenever Israel came up from the festivals, the curtain (of the Holy of Holies) would be removed for them and the Cherubim were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwined with one another and would be thus addressed: 'Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman (B. Yoma 54a).

Even when drawn, the curtain of the Holy of Holies was erotically charged. The poles of the Ark of the Covenant behind the curtain (see 1 Kgs 8.8), pressed against it and 'protruded as the two breasts of a woman, as it is said: 'my beloved is unto me as a bag of myrrh that lieth between my breasts' (B. Yoma 54a, citing Song 1.13). The Temple and its rituals, then, are understood to be the location not merely of a general divine presence but the very place in which a cosmic sacred marriage of the Holy One and the Shekhinah is effected. This sacred marriage takes place primarily on the Day of Atonement.

Finally, by applying Norton's Hylas pattern to the Day of Atonement ritual, the two goats, Yahweh and Azazel, thus represent the sacred boy beloved and the monstrous double who is

killed or expelled. Both are being one and the same. The bull, El, recalls the sacrificial king in whose place the boy dies. That the boy surrogate and the king represent a unity is signified by the mixing of the blood of both the bull and the goat to use for atoning the sanctuary. Azazel is Yahweh's monstrous double, while Yahweh is Father El's boy surrogate, the beloved boy and son. The unity of all three figures is denoted in the high priest who not only represents Yahweh but also both sends out the Azazel goat and slaughters the Yahweh goat.

ABSALOM-HYLAS

Interestingly Norton identified the story of David, Jonathan and Saul as closely fitting this Hylas pattern. He says, 'David's right to reign as the new sacred king, having dispatched both the previous sacred king and the boy-surrogate, is established by his near-identity with Jonathan… by their close love-relationship that inspired the jealousy of Saul' (1974: 118). It strikes me too that the David-Jonathan-Saul triad fits the Atonement pattern quite well. David is the one sent out, driven out, while Jonathan is, as Norton says the boy surrogate who stays behind to die. Saul is the sacred king who carries out the cultic roles that will later be transferred to the high priest. Saul's death together with Jonathan's recalls a time when it was the sacral king who died in the rituals.

But what I want to do now is explore the way this atonement pattern underpins another narrative – Absalom's rebellion and death in 2 Samuel 15-18. This narrative follows and is set in motion by the earlier story of Amnon, Tamar and Absalom, which I would also argue fits the atonement pattern. In this previous narrative, Amnon is slain by his brother, Absalom, who then flees into exile. Echoing the Cain and Abel narrative, Absalom acts following David's extraordinary quiescence in, almost endorsement of, Amnon's rape of Tamar, Absalom's sister, much as Cain is moved by the LORD's apparent endorsement of Abel's sacrifice over Cain's. The rape of Tamar further recalls sacred marriage and its origins in ritual rape.

Turning to Absalom's rebellion, what is particularly noteworthy is that both David and Absalom share the role of the go-away goat. In David's case, it is a reprise of the role he had in the triad with Jonathan and Saul. He will repeat it here but in much more obviously sacral and cultic terms than in 1 Samuel. Absalom, too, has already fled into exile following the murder of Amnon and he commences his revolt by again quitting Jerusalem, by moving to Hebron. The revolt is launched in Hebron but the text has no interest in what transpires. Instead messengers come to David telling him that 'the hearts of the Israelites have gone after Absalom' (2 Sam 15.13). David's response is to immediately flee Jerusalem and seek safety in the wilderness. Throughout his progress he meets a range of people – McCarter says that the account of David's flight could be subtitled 'Many Meetings' (McCarter 1984: 374). While he points out that these meetings help to prepare the reader for parts of the story to come, there is nonetheless something strange about David's flight. As McCarter acknowledges, 'his flight seems sometimes to have the character of a religious pilgrimage rather than a strategic military retreat' (1984: 375). Aspects of it have led many commentators, including McCarter, to see it as a penitential exercise. By way of illustration, McCarter cites Ackroyd's observation, although he does not agree with him, that the story 'is being told under the influence of forms which belong to worship, in which the humiliation and triumph of the king are celebrated not as historical events but as indications of the king's relationship to God' (cited McCarter 1984: 376). This quality is reinforced by David's

encounter with Shimei who curses David and throws stones at him and his entourage. I would agree with Ackroyd and argue that Ackroyd's worship forms are those of the annual enthronement and validation rituals of the New Year of which the Day of Atonement is a part. Often as part of these rituals the king or a surrogate underwent humiliation and abuse, traces of which remain in Isaiah's Servant songs (Barker 1996: 67–68, 113–131) and might also lie behind much of the material in Job (cf Girard 1987). Shimei's stoning and cursing of David is also reminiscent of the abuse of the go-away goat in both the Barnabas and Mishnah accounts of the Day of Atonement. So while David reprises his role of the go-away goat, this time the sacral framework of the role is acknowledged in the text.

Absalom comes to Jerusalem and installs himself in his father's house. He proclaims it by publicly ensconcing himself in his father's harem, or at least the handful of concubines who stayed behind to keep the house. Absalom goes to his father's concubines on the roof 'in the sight of all Israel' (16.22). This public act recalls the public rites of sacred marriage that were observed on the Day of Atonement. It seems clear that the concubines have no choice in this transaction. So once again the text exposes sacred marriage origins in ritual rape. But there is another aspect here too. Blok, in his study of adultery, cuckoldry and honour, argues that, in Mediterranean cultures, successful 'claims on a woman entail domination of other men, both from the point of view of the husband... and of the adulterer' (Blok 1981: 431). Furthermore Carol Delaney, observes that, in patriarchal Mediterranean cultures, if a man has sex with another's wife (or concubine):

> the boundary of what is his (the husband's) has been penetrated or broken by someone else, he is put in the position of a woman and is therefore shamed... Since the seed carries the essential identity of a man, it leaves an indelible imprint which no amount of washing can erase. A woman who has sexual relations with any man other than her husband becomes physically polluted, and, through her, her husband's honour is stained (Delaney 1987: 40, 42).

By raping the concubines Absalom is being the top to his father. Indeed the concubines are surrogates for David here and we can read Absalom as symbolically raping his father, which is a curious reversal of the sexual interaction of king and boy surrogate (perhaps).[5]

The final act is Absalom's death. As David's son, Absalom is the boy surrogate to the sacral king, just as Jonathan was to Saul. In the Absalom narrative the roles of the slaughtered goat and the go-away goat are collapsed back into one. What we have here is the unmasked struggle between king and surrogate to determine which one dies. However, here the manner of Absalom's death is most striking. Fleeing from battle into the woods, his hair gets entangled in an oak or terebinth tree and he is caught suspended from the tree. There Joab, David's commander, in the company of a band of men finds Absalom hanging from the tree. Before the battle David had given instructions that no harm should come to his son. However, confronted with Absalom's helplessness, Joab takes three spears and 'thrust them into the heart of Absalom' (18.14). The other men also strike Absalom and kill him. The dead prince is then buried in a deep pit and a large heap of stones raised over him.

The text goes out of its way to absolve David of any responsibility for Absalom's death. This diversion of accountability is a regular feature of mythic texts. Blame and responsibility are di-

verted from the killers of sacral victims to others, even to the victims themselves. In this case, Joab is David's chief agent. He brought about the death of Uriah on David's behalf. In many respects he is David's hypostatic shadow self. While David laments the death of his son (recalling the ritual lament Norton identified as a constitutive part of the Hylas liturgy), David, as king, is responsible and indeed benefits from his son's death. Absalom's death secures David's continuing rule.

Absalom's death too is very strange. If his father's flight is imbued with ritual overtones, so too is the death of the son. Suspended from a tree, he is pierced with spears – has anyone seen here a prefiguring of Calvary? The tree itself is not just any old tree but an oak, a terebinth, which is also imbued with cultic meaning. It is sacred to and symbolizes Asherah, the Queen of Heaven who was not simply a consort of El (Elyon) but the female aspect of an androgynous divine principle comprising both herself and El (Barker 1992: 57; Wyatt 2005: 246–248).The tree represents the power of Wisdom that sustains the universe – being the Tree of Life – and it must not be forgotten that the Temple itself was understood as an Edenic space. One must ask then, if, like David's flight from Jerusalem, Absalom's death is not also shaped under 'the influence of forms which belong to worship.' Finally Absalom is buried in a pit, beneath a great pile of stones recalling Achan's fate in Joshua and the fate of Asael/Azazel in 1 Enoch 10.

Siam Bhayro (2006) has argued that the story of Absalom's rebellion is the very model for the story of the rebellion of the angels in 1 Enoch 6-11. He finds a number of parallels between the 2 Samuel account of Absalom's rebellion and the Enochian narrative. Furthermore, he observes that there are further close parallels between the Absalom encountered in later Jewish tradition and Shemihazah who is the leader of the angels in 1 Enoch. Bhayro makes a good case, however, as I pointed out before, that the Enochian narrative of the fallen angels is not one but two accounts – the story of Shemihazah and the two hundred angels who go down to earth and sire the giants and a fragmentary story of Asael who corrupts humans with knowledge. While this latter story has been submerged in the former, it is quite distinct and bears no strong resemblance, bar one, to the Absalom narrative with its images of rebellion. Nor does Bhayro demonstrate any narrative parallels apart from the shared fate of being buried beneath a pile of stones. However if Absalom's rebellion is the model for Shemihazah's rebellion then perhaps the link is that pile of stones. In other words both Absalom and Asael narratively share their origins in the Day of Atonement rituals and the role of the go-away goat, Azazel. Therefore Absalom's rebellion would make an obvious model to create the new story of Shemihazah's rebellion grafted onto the Asael narrative.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

I want now to consider some implications of my foregoing discussion. I observed at the outset that the Temple was the great repressed in biblical studies. What Fletcher-Lewis observes about the marginalization of the priesthood in biblical studies could apply equally as well to the Temple and its rituals: 'Old Testament scholarship has sometimes judged such material a lamentable decline in Israelite religion from the pure faith of the prophets and the Deuteronomist into a post-exilic obsession with cultic order and institutional religiosity' (Fletcher-Lewis 2006:156). Indeed, the Temple and its rituals could be seen to be the driving object of desire of these texts, including the prophets and Deuteronomy. And while I had recognized for some time the cultic underpinning of the Torah narratives, I confess to have been surprised to find how strongly an

apparently 'secular' narrative like the rebellion and death of Absalom is shaped and framed by cultic forms. While long recognizing their fictive nature, I now wonder whether the narratives of 1 & 2 Samuel should be considered as a form of sacral drama. It also serves as a reminder for biblical scholars not to bracket out but take seriously the mythic and polytheistic background of the biblical texts (c.f. Wyatt 2005: 179) rather than reading them 'as the writings of a' consistently 'monotheistic faith which had one God with several names' (Barker 1992: 28).

This sacral quality of 1&2 Samuel highlights even more the centrality of the Day of Atonement and atonement rituals for biblical religion(s). This centrality should come as no surprise given how ubiquitous these rituals are in the religions of the ancient Middle East. The biblical world is part of, not apart from, this broader Middle Eastern religiosity. As I observed earlier, I regard these texts as comprising a project of transformation of that older Middle Eastern religiosity. For some time now, too, I have been considering the correlation of sacrifice with the maternal. It has struck me that sacrifice attempts both to appropriate and approximate the maternal. Nancy Jay observes that sacrifice is 'childbirth done better' (cited Kearns 2008:51) and this is particularly the case for rituals of expiation and propitiation. Cleo McNelly Kearns denotes such rituals as 'strong rites' of sacrifice (Kearns 2008: 30). According to Kearns such strong sacrificial rites invariably require a male only priesthood. She further points out that the obverse to this maternally appropriating strong sacrifice is alimentary or weak sacrifice, which tends to inclusively gender the priesthood of those who preside over and perform these rites. I would suggest that alimentary or weak sacrifice tends more to approximating the maternal rather than simply appropriating it as is the case in strong sacrifice. And I am also struck by the possibility that the biblical Day of Atonement indicates a shift away from an older form of expiatory/propitiatory sacrifice to a substitionary non-sacrificial rite of healing. Blood is still shed because blood equals life. However the blood denotes the life of the LORD, represented by the high priest, whose life is poured out to sustain, renew and restore the cosmos. To cite the Eucharistic prayer of the Liberal Catholic Church, on the Day of Atonement the LORD is manifested as 'the eternal high priest, (who) forever offers Himself as the eternal Sacrifice' (Wedgwood & Leadbetter 1915:18). This eternal self-sacrificing quality of the LORD approximates the sustaining and nurturing quality of the maternal body. Furthermore the hints in both the Mishnah and Barnabas that, occasionally at least, the raw flesh of the slaughtered goat was eaten by (certain of) the priests reinforce this nurturing alimentary quality of the LORD's self sacrifice. The slaughtered goat, after all, represents the LORD and while the animal might die, the LORD liturgically and mythologically does not. Moreover, as part of this shift from strong to weak sacrifice, the Day of Atonement rituals appear to break down the dichotomy of the monstrous and heroic. The goats are identical, the blood of goat and bull are mixed together, both high priest and goat represent the LORD. By highlighting the identifications, the ritual would appear to destabilize and demythologize the narratives of strong sacrifice such as are found in the Ugaritic Baal cycle and the Babylonian Enuma Elish. I would suggest, too, that by exposing the identifications in these mythologies the ritual also exposes the homo-erotic and transgender undertones as well. The LORD and Azazel are the twin faces of El's beloved boy substitute, while the maternal dimensions of the LORD's self sacrifice enable the association of feminine imagery with the LORD and most prominently the linking of Lady Wisdom as the female face of the LORD.[6]

I deliberately cited the Liberal Catholic Church's Eucharistic prayer because I believe there are implications for Christianity in these apparent atonement dynamics. Atonement is one of the central motifs of Christianity, the execution of Jesus being interpreted in terms of atonement theologies. Given that Jesus was executed at Passover such atonement theologies don't make the immediate sense that they would have done if he had been executed on Yom Kippur. However, if the Day of Atonement mythologies stand behind the Passover myth of the Exodus, coupled with the fact that both Passover and the Day of Atonement are equinoctial feasts occurring at the head of the secular and sacred years, then the connections of his death with the Day of Atonement become readily apparent. Furthermore, Crispin Fletcher-Lewis (2006 & 2007) has argued that Jesus understood himself to be the heavenly eschatological high priest, 'Israel's Melchizedekian priest-king' (2006: 175, cf Ps 110 & 11QMelch). If that is so perhaps such atonement theology derives from Jesus himself, who, in the face of his approaching death, may have himself interpreted it in terms of the rituals and symbolism of the Day of Atonement. Stepping into the atonement gestalt, Jesus' death becomes the full earthly manifestation of the LORD's own eternal life-outpouring, liturgically represented and performed each year on the Day of Atonement. Margaret Barker has observed that 'the later liturgies of the Church seem more akin to the Day of Atonement than to Passover and it may be that the Day of Atonement was the context from the beginning' impelling her to suggest that there '*can be no certainty that what the Eucharist became was different from Jesus' original intention*' (Barker 2007: 23–24, Barker's italics). The Eucharist is part, then, of the same gestalt as the Day of Atonement, a rite of healing and renewal manifesting that same 'eternal Sacrifice' concretely instantiated in Jesus' execution. Furthermore, it participates in that same shift from strong to weak sacrifice, I noted above concerning the Day of Atonement. If as Kearns argues, weak sacrifice allows for, if not requires, more gender inclusive priesthoods, I would suggest, this fact provides ground for those of us arguing for the ordination of women in Catholic traditions, ground inherent to the atonement dynamics underpinning the Eucharist itself.

My final point for consideration concerns the homoerotic framework provided by the Hylas myth for the atonement ritual pattern. Norton himself recognized parallels between the Hylas myth and central Christian themes and imagery. Rollan McCleary says of the the myth that 'there is possible significance here for the understanding of Christianity and its relation to gay mythos and ethos' (McCleary 2004: 33). He suggests the archetypal themes contained in this myth are central to Christianity, making it, paradoxically, the 'most 'gay' of world religions' (McCleary 2004: ix). In fact, both can be seen as instances of a mythic dynamic that can only be termed homosexual, having at its heart the institution and practices of sacrifice. In the Hylas myth, a boy substitute is sacrificed in place of the sacred king, the rituals being performed within an androgynously sacred realm. Similarly, Christian myth and symbol bring together Father, Son within an androgynous divine (in whose image both male and female are created) in a drama 'stressing sacrifice of a surrogate' (McCleary 2004: 33) albeit dramatically reconfigured. I would suggest that adopting the atonement pattern as the basis for his project required Jesus to embrace the entire atonement gestalt including its homo-erotic framework. Perhaps that is why John's gospel – I would contend the most Eucharistic of the canonical gospels – has as its central motif the homoerotic image of 'the teacher's love for his favourite … the relation between Jesus and his beloved disciple' – *paiderastia* – 'as the perfect entrance into the knowledge of God's love for his son and consequently of God's love for the cosmos' (van Tilborg 1993: 246, 248). Perhaps,

then, atonement, the focal point of the Christian mythos, might enable not only the reconciliation of Christianity with its homosexual Other but also provision of a new sacral framework within Catholic traditions and broader society for same sex love and eros.

ENDNOTES

[1] For some time now I have been interested in the Jewish background of virgin motherhood (and other) Marian motifs and the sexual politics encoded therein, I have been struck by notions of virgin motherhood, associated with the matriarchs in Genesis, especially Sarah, which I initially encountered in the works of the ancient Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria. These notions reappeared in later Jewish texts, including esoteric texts of the Oral Scriptures, putting in question scholarly accounts of Mary's Virgin Motherhood as a pagan notion grafted onto a misreading or mistranslation of Isaiah to denote Jesus as God's son (c.f. Carden 2005 & forthcoming).

[2] The Mishnah also adds that a non-Israelite was preferred to lead the goat into the wilderness (Yoma 6.3).

[3] 1 Enoch is part of the Ethiopian Old Testament and was clearly counted as scripture for many early Christians, and perhaps, too, at Qumran. I take a 'catholic' approach to scripture and do not restrict myself to the Hebrew canon of Protestantism or Rabbinic Judaism but now work in the broad canonical spectrum/gestalt of Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic/Syriac and other texts that comprise the Old Testament literatures of Catholic Christianities and scriptures of ancient Judaisms.

[4] Mary Douglas favored the identification of the go away goat with Joseph, being hostile to readings that identified Azazel as a desert demon (2004: 57). Likewise Carmichael (2000) argues for the origins and mythological underpinning of the Day of Atonement in the Genesis narrative of Joseph and his brothers.

[5] The dynamics of male-male anal sex are sufficiently fluid that it doesn't really matter whether the king fucks or is fucked by the boy, the boy is still spatially configured as the king's penis. Even if one were to insist that being top or bottom denotes a difference, as the bottom to the boy, the penetrated king is invested with a phallic aura just as much as the penetrated boy would be. Given that the restoration of phallic fertility power is central to these rituals then the imbuing of the king with the phallic gestalt might then even warrant that it is the king who is fucked by the boy rather than vice versa.

[6] Is Lady Wisdom herself derived from Anat who may have originally been Yahweh's sister-consort and appears to have been worshipped as such at the Jewish Elephantine temple (Patai 1978: 53–58)? Given that Wisdom is an hypostasis of the LORD, did Anat stand in the same relation to Yahweh as Asherah to El, being thus the female aspect of an androgynous divine principle comprising both herself and Yahweh (Wyatt 2005: 246–248)? Wyatt has suggested that in Canaanite mythology Baal and Anat functioned as a 'microcosmic' mirroring of the 'macrocosmic' pair Asherah/Athirat and El (Wyatt 2005: 25–26). Did Yahweh-Anat function as part of a similar gestalt with El Elyon-Asherah thus facilitating the monotheistic merging that give rise to biblical religions?

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