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# TAKING AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD

EGŌ EIMI AND THE DAY OF ATONEMENT IN JOHN

JACKSON ABHAU

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**Abstract:** The presence of Jewish themes and allusions in the Gospel of John has received much scholarly attention in recent decades. This study follows this trend, exploring several possible connections between the Day of Atonement and the Johannine narrative. In this paper, I argue that these connections—which include John the Baptist’s identification of Jesus with the Lamb of God, echoes of the scapegoat ritual, high-priest-like prayers, and the repeated use of the phrase *egō eimi*—were deliberately incorporated into the narrative by the author of John as pointed allusions to the Day of Atonement. For the original audience, as well as today’s careful reader, these echoes reinforce the Evangelist’s purpose in writing—namely, convincing his audience to believe “that Jesus is the Messiah” (John 20:31)—by demonstrating Jesus’s role in the expiation of his community’s sin.

The unique perspective of the Fourth Gospel has intrigued many of its readers and provoked a wide array of scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Once held to be the most Christian of the Gospels, recent scholarship has found the Gospel of John to be saturated with the Judaism of its time.<sup>2</sup> Allusions to Jewish themes and ideas make up a

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1. Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John: Text and Context*, BibInt 72 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 137; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

2. Alan R. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus’ Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John*, LNTS (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002); Mark S. Kinzer, “Temple Christology in the Gospel of John,” SBLSP 37 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 447–64; Dorothy A. Lee, “Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John: A Narrative and Symbolic Reading,” *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 24 (2011): 13–26; Nicholas P. Lunn, “Jesus, the Ark, and the Day of Atonement:

significant part of the way that the narrative and the portrait of Jesus are framed. In this study, I argue that the forgiveness of sins, sanctification, and the appeasement of God's wrath—all articulated most clearly in Jewish scripture by the Day of Atonement and its rituals—form an important part of the Johannine narrative.

I argue that throughout the Gospel, the author of John alludes to rites associated with the Day of Atonement as it may have been understood by his audience. There are many points of contact, but for the purposes of this study, I will focus on four: John the Baptist's theme-setting assertion, "Here is the Lamb of God" (John 1:29); parallels between Jesus's trial and the scapegoat ritual; high priestly intercession in John 17; and the repeated use of the Greek phrase *egō eimi*.<sup>3</sup> These allusions have roots in the Hebrew Bible and are paralleled in other post-temple reflections on Yom Kippur in rabbinic writings. The instances of correlation occur in ways and at times that suggest an underlying scheme in the narrative. This scheme points the reader to the theme of atonement and betrays an authorial purpose: to present Jesus and his story in light of the expiation of sins.

Some of these issues have been addressed by others, who have noticed a broad inclination towards temple themes in John. The temple theme has been explored generally, but not with a specific end in mind, by scholars such as Alan Kerr and Mark Kinzer, who explore the connections between Israelite cultic practice and John.<sup>4</sup> In addition, several scholars have noted individual themes that suggest literary connections with Yom Kippur. For example, Jennifer Maclean has found extensive similarities between the Barabbas narrative and the scapegoat ritual.<sup>5</sup> Harold Attridge, Gerald Janzen, and others have written on the priestly implications of Jesus's prayer in John 17.<sup>6</sup> David Ball, Paul Anderson, and Catrin Williams have given treatment to the implications of Jesus's "I am" sayings in light of the nuances of the Greek *egō eimi*.<sup>7</sup> However, so far as I can tell, no one has pre-

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Intertextual Echoes in John 19:38–20:18," *JETS* 52 (2009): 731–46.

3. Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

4. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus' Body*; Kinzer, "Temple Christology"

5. Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean, "Barabbas, the Scapegoat Ritual, and the Development of the Passion Narrative," *HTR* 100.3 (2007): 309–34.

6. Harold W. Attridge, "How Priestly is the 'High Priestly Prayer' of John 17?" *CBQ* 75 (2013): 1–14;

J. Gerald Janzen, "The Scope of Jesus's High Priestly Prayer in John 17," *Enc* 67.1 (2006): 1–26.

7. David Mark Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996); Paul N. Anderson, "The Origin and Development of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* Sayings in Cognitive-Critical Perspective," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9 (2011): 139–206; Catrin H. Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of 'Anī Hū' in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, WUNT 2/113 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

sented these elements together, especially as they relate to the Day of Atonement rituals. The closest thing to a systematic synthesis of these elements is found in an article by Nicholas Lunn that deals with several possible intertextual allusions to the Day of Atonement in the Johannine passion narrative.<sup>8</sup> Lunn draws several parallels together and observes that together, the parallels make a stronger case for deliberate allusion.<sup>9</sup> My hope is to add to Lunn's contribution by introducing several new elements of allusion: the aforementioned Baptist's declaration, the scapegoat ritual, the priestly prayer in John 17, and the repetition of *egō eimi*.

Of course, without access to the Gospel's author, this sort of study, which attempts to identify a deliberate literary scheme in the text, can never arrive at certainty—only probability. Likewise, an isolated point or two of contact with Israelite ritual may be nothing more than coincidence. However, as cogent parallels accumulate, the likelihood of a legitimate narrative design increases dramatically.

## NARRATIVE DESIGN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND JOHN

This discussion's scope falls within the jurisdiction of literary criticism. Literary criticism's methodology "assume[s] that the extant text is ordered to convey a message and . . . attempts to discover how that message is conveyed as well as what the message is."<sup>10</sup> For this reason, matters such as the history and criticism of the text itself, worthwhile as they may be, must be set aside. This study's concern is with the text as we have it, and this study will view it as a unified whole, written with a deliberate authorial purpose. This process should begin with a few qualifying questions: Is it reasonable to assume that the Gospel's author was capable of composing a complex narrative, aided by allusions? And if this is the case, did he have an interest in the temple and the Day of Atonement rites?

The first question, that of authorial capacity, is worth asking. John's Greek is by no means impressive; in fact, it is among "the simplest Greek" in the New Testament.<sup>11</sup> Is it reasonable to expect a complex narrative in such unassuming Greek? The Gospel text suggests that the author's storytelling ability far surpasses his linguistic skill. Scholars have identified several complex narrative schemes running through the Gospel, such as the corresponding "Book of Signs" and "Book of Glory,"<sup>12</sup> numerical patterns of sevens and threes,<sup>13</sup> and deeply ironic

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8. Lunn, "Intertextual Echoes."

9. Lunn, "Intertextual Echoes," 746.

10. Ball, *I Am*, 13.

11. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 5.

12. See Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 290.

13. See Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 17.

presentations.<sup>14</sup> Mark Stibbe describes the Gospel as “artistically conceived,”<sup>15</sup> Wm. Randolph Bynum claims that John’s use of scripture is a work of “literary and theological genius,”<sup>16</sup> and Dorothy Lee observes that the Gospel’s use of narration to convey information “reveals the richness and diversity of the narrator’s skill.”<sup>17</sup> Elementary Greek aside, the Gospel of John is a complex text guided by skillful narration.

Since it’s plausible that the Johannine author is capable of crafting an intricate narrative, the second question remains: Is he likely to build portions of that narrative around themes found in Day of Atonement liturgy? The studies of Kerr, Kinzer, and others have demonstrated that this is indeed likely. Kerr speaks of the probability that the author had “an interest in the Temple and its institutions,”<sup>18</sup> and the study of cultic interests in John has become a burgeoning field in recent decades.<sup>19</sup> The two questions are answered in the affirmative: the Gospel of John *does* betray a complex literary scheme and seems particularly interested in matters of temple and cult. Reviewing some of these relevant elements of cult will be beneficial for this study.

## THE DAY OF ATONEMENT IN THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD: A GENERAL SURVEY

The Day of Atonement was, as Isaac Kalimi writes, “the climax of the Jewish High Holy Days,” representing “the hope for freshness and new beginning for individuals and for the collective.”<sup>20</sup> The day’s rituals served the purpose of expiating both individual and community sin and cleansing the sanctuary from defilement. The biblical prescriptions for the day are brief. Located among the Torah’s priestly legislation, Lev 16 directs the high priest, washed and wearing special linen clothing, to bring several sacrifices forward: a bull, a ram, and two

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14. See George W. MacRae, “Theology and Irony in the Fourth Gospel,” in *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives*, ed. Mark W. G. Stibbe (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 103–13.

15. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, 22.

16. Wm. Randolph Bynum, *The Fourth Gospel and the Scriptures: Illuminating the Form and Meaning of Scriptural Citation in John 19:37* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 172.

17. Dorothy A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning*, LNTS (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 230.

18. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus’s Body*, 371. See also pp. 8–19.

19. Annang Asumang and Mzayifani H. Mzebetshana, “Temple Christology in the Gospel According to John: A Survey of Scholarship in the Last Twenty Years (1996–2016),” *Conspectus* 24 (2017): 133–65; Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus’s Body*; Kinzer, “Temple Christology.”

20. Isaac Kalimi, “The Day of Atonement in the Late Second Temple Period,” in *The Day of Atonement: Its Interpretations in Early Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Thomas Hieke and Tobias Nicklas (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 75.

goats (Lev 16:3–5). He casts lots over the goats, designating one as the scapegoat and the other as a sin-offering (Lev 16:6–10). Once this is done, the high priest offers the bull as a sin-offering, brings its blood into the holy of holies (along with incense), and sprinkles its blood on the mercy seat (Lev 16:11–14). He then does the same with the sin-offering goat and releases the scapegoat into the wilderness (Lev 16:15–22). After removing the sacred clothing and bathing again, he offers the ram as a burnt offering, concluding the day's rites (Lev 16:23–28). It is to be a solemn day of fasting and rest (Lev 16:29–31).<sup>21</sup>

Of course, since “it is evident that Lev 16 could never suffice to describe in detail the temple cult,”<sup>22</sup> later writings expand the relatively sparse biblical injunctions. By the time the rabbis put the ritual to paper, the liturgy—in their minds, at least—had expanded. An entire Mishnah tractate, *Yoma*, is dedicated to the day's rites. The general sequence of events is unchanged, but the rabbinic literature fills in gaps, elaborates on how the procedures should be completed, and provides safeguards in the event of worst-case scenarios. It adds details such as the preparation of a substitute high priest,<sup>23</sup> the high priest's being kept up during the night prior to ensure ritual cleanliness,<sup>24</sup> the specifics of the scapegoat's exile,<sup>25</sup> and the words to be used when praying over the sacrifices—highly formulaic prayers invoking the divine name YHWH.<sup>26</sup> The rites were to be followed with exactness; if not, as Isaac Kalimi summarizes, “there would be neither forgiveness nor purification.”<sup>27</sup> Despite the consensus that the ritual needed to be done perfectly, there were disagreements over the nature of the liturgy, and the Babylonian Talmud recounts that a Sadducean high priest performed the ritual contrary to the Pharisees' instructions and died shortly thereafter—a reflection of divine judgment.<sup>28</sup>

Like the Gospel of John, these rabbinic writings postdate the actual performance of the Day of Atonement's ritual, albeit by several centuries more. Since few other sources detail the festival's practice in the time of Jesus, it's difficult to say how accurately the rabbinic writings and John—should it be alluding to *Yom*

21. For a thorough, verse-by-verse treatment of Lev 16, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1009–84.

22. Günter Stemmerger, “Yom Kippur in Mishnah Yoma,” in Hieke and Nicklas, *The Day of Atonement*, 135.

23. Mishnah *Yoma* 1:1. All Mishnah citations are from Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

24. Mishnah *Yoma* 1:4–7.

25. Mishnah *Yoma* 4:2, 6:1–6.

26. Mishnah *Yoma* 3:8, 4:2, 6:2.

27. Kalimi, “The Day of Atonement in the Second Temple Period,” 80.

28. Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 19b. All Talmud citations are from Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: An Academic Commentary*, V: *Yoma* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).

Kippur—present the liturgy. Some aspects, the scapegoat ritual and high priestly prayer among them, are attested outside of *Yoma* and are therefore, according to Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, “almost certainly historic.”<sup>29</sup> Other aspects are more dubious. In all likelihood, the extent of the Day of Atonement’s performance during the late Second Temple Period probably fell somewhere in between Leviticus’s sparse injunctions and the complex rabbinic prescriptions. However, since the temple cult had ceased by the time of both John’s and *Yoma*’s writing, the historicity of their presentation of Yom Kippur is of little importance for this study. Rather, they both reflect a later understanding of the Day of Atonement’s ritual, and parallels that occur between them are more likely the product of this understanding.<sup>30</sup> In other words, suggesting that John alludes to the Day of Atonement is less a matter of establishing congruence between the Johannine narrative and the actual ritual as it was performed during the Second Temple Period as it is of demonstrating its congruence with other post-temple reflections on what once was. On this account, the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Talmud are valuable sources.

## THE JOHANNINE NARRATIVE AND THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Now that the Day of Atonement has been addressed generally, the remainder of this study will be devoted to in-depth analyses of parallels between Levitical and rabbinic presentations of the holy day and the Johannine narrative. Most often, these correlations identify Jesus with either the Day of Atonement’s sacrifice or with the high priest who performs the day’s rites. These two ideas need not contradict one another; the Epistle to the Hebrews opts for a similar dual identification of Jesus as both sacrificer and sacrifice, “both high priest and victim.”<sup>31</sup> John may be tapping into a similar strand of early Christian thought.

Since constructing a hypothesis around perceived parallels can be precarious, it’s worth establishing some ground rules at the outset. In *The Context of Scripture*, K. Lawson Younger outlines the challenge of the responsible scholar, who must balance his study between “overstressing the parallels” and “ignoring clear, informative correlations.”<sup>32</sup> Drifting too far to either of these extremes—parallelomania or parallelophobia—can often prove damaging to an argument. To guard against these missteps of comparison, Younger proposes criteria for

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29. Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 19.

30. This article assumes a late first century date for the composition of the Fourth Gospel, which, while believed by the majority of scholars, is unproven.

31. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus’s Body*, 369; see Heb 9:11–12.

32. K. Lawson Younger, Jr., “The ‘Contextual Method’: Some West Semitic Reflections,” *COS* 3:xxxvi–xxxvii.

assessing the validity of parallels: the standard of propinquity. “A parallel,” he writes, “that is closer to the biblical material in language, in geographic proximity, in time, and culture is a stronger parallel than one that is removed from the biblical material along one or more of these lines.”<sup>33</sup>

At a basic level, the comparisons connect John and Lev 16, but since the New Testament draws not only upon the writings of the Old, but also on the shared culture of Second Temple Judaism, other sources connected with this cultural reservoir make valuable resources for this project. Rabbinic literature is especially useful, since it is concerned with the Levitical rituals but is a bit closer in time and culture to New Testament-era Judaism. Although they are late sources, the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Talmud offer an update on Torah ritual that is probably more congruent with post-temple understanding of Yom Kippur than the laconic prescriptions of Leviticus. Again, these rabbinic sources need not be an exact copy of first-century liturgy, so long as they represent a fairly typical post-temple understanding of the Day of Atonement. The standard of geographical proximity is also favorable to these comparisons, as the various sources all share a provenance in ancient Palestine. There isn’t a clear linguistic correlation—Leviticus and the rabbinic literature being in Hebrew and John in Koine Greek—but much of the New Testament’s Greek is heavily semiticized.<sup>34</sup> With these established criteria for judging the merit of potential parallels, the four connections can now be explored in depth.

### *The Lamb of God*

“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). This exclamation by John the Baptist opens the Johannine narrative and is often cited as evidence that the Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus as the paschal lamb. While Passover imagery is likely at work here, there’s difficulty with regarding this declaration as a wholesale identification of Jesus with the *pesah* sacrifice: Passover’s paschal lamb has no role in remitting sins, since, as Sandra Schneiders observes, “the paschal lamb was not an expiatory but a communion sacrifice.”<sup>35</sup> Although Schneiders and Dorothy Lee both argue for a paschal interpretation of John’s Jesus, they agree that this image fits a Day of Atonement rather than a Passover context. Lee writes, “the reference to taking away sin . . . suggests not

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33. Younger, “Contextual Method,” xxxvii.

34. *BDF*, 3–4.

35. Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Lamb of God and the Forgiveness of Sin(s) in the Fourth Gospel,” *CBQ* 73 (2011): 1–29, here 18.



Passover but temple,” and especially suggests the ritual “on the Day of Atonement, which literally ‘takes away’ the sins of the people into the wilderness.”<sup>36</sup>

So, is “the Lamb of God” the Passover sacrifice or the sacrifice of Yom Kippur? Jesus is clearly connected with the paschal lamb in other places in the Johannine narrative, particularly in the passion narrative, where the Evangelist takes care to note that Jesus’s death fulfills the Passover prescriptions of the Pentateuch.<sup>37</sup> This symbolism is widely recognized, yet the fact remains that the “paschal lamb was not ordinarily understood to take away sin,” and so the epithet attached to Jesus by John the Baptist remains problematic from the perspective of a purely paschal interpretation.<sup>38</sup> The Greek offers little in the way of clarification. Comparing the terms used in Exod 12 (Passover), Lev 16 (Day of Atonement), and John 1 yields ambiguous results. Exodus 12’s paschal lamb is *probaton* (from the Hebrew *šeh*) in the Septuagint, and Lev 16’s sin offering and scapegoat are both *chimaros* (from *šā’ir*), but John 1 uses the neutral *amnos*, which in a sacrificial context has reference only to the daily offerings.<sup>39</sup>

It would appear that either no direct comparison is being made, which seems unlikely in light of John’s “constant” symbolism,<sup>40</sup> or that, more likely, the “Lamb of God” is intended as a “composite” figure that encompasses several ideas at once.<sup>41</sup> While the majority interpretation of John’s “lamb” as a Passover symbol has strong merit, this conclusion should not be endorsed to the point of excluding the possibility of additional symbolism. Nicholas Lunn sees no problem with the idea that “Christ’s death is depicted at one and the same time in terms of both Passover and Day of Atonement.”<sup>42</sup> Lee, in fact, sees value in this approach, adding that “both associations . . . make sense of the Johannine description of the lamb, enlarging the meaning beyond that of Passover.”<sup>43</sup> An integral part of this enlarged meaning is the removal of sin, which suggests themes from the Day of Atonement and sets the stage upon which the author intends us to view Jesus’s death—the ritual of the scape and immolated goats.

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36. Lee, “Paschal Imagery,” 16.

37. John 19:28–37. For more on this, see Lee, “Paschal Imagery,” 24–26, and Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 193–98.

38. Koester, *Symbolism*, 198.

39. See Exod 29:39.

40. Koester, *Symbolism*, 12.

41. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 147.

42. Lunn, “Intertextual Echoes,” 737.

43. Lee, “Paschal Imagery,” 16–17.

### *The Scapegoat Ritual*

The scapegoat ritual is perhaps the most famous of the Day of Atonement's prescriptions. According to Leviticus, two goats were to be brought to the temple courtyard, and as part of the day's rites, they were to be assigned by lot. One—the immolated goat—was to be made a sin offering and have its blood “sprinkl[ed] upon the mercy seat” (Lev 16:15). The other—the scapegoat—was to have the community's sins conferred upon its head and was then to be led into the wilderness, “bear[ing] on itself all their iniquities to a barren region” (Lev 16:22). Rabbinic tradition has the scapegoat humiliated on its way out of the city and then pushed off a cliff.<sup>44</sup> There are significant parallels between this ritual and the narrative of Jesus's sentence and Barabbas's release. Pontius Pilate, referencing “a custom that [he] release someone for [the crowd] at Passover,” asks the assembled crowd, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” (John 18:39). The crowd rejects this offer, demanding Barabbas instead (John 18:40). These two men—Jesus and Barabbas—may represent the two goats.

Modern Christian interpretation, influenced by social-scientific thought, consistently identifies the scapegoat with Jesus.<sup>45</sup> This wasn't always the case. So far as it can be determined, the earliest exegetes saw Jesus not as the fulfillment of the scapegoat, but as the fulfillment of the immolated goat. The author of Hebrews presents Jesus as a Day of Atonement sacrifice, Jennifer Maclean explains, “without any mention of the scapegoat,” and Origen, who “clearly understood Christ's death to be a fulfillment of the immolated goat,” “does not associate the scapegoat with Christ at all, but rather with the devil.”<sup>46</sup> Maclean summarizes, “the connection between Jesus and the immolated goat was so deeply imbedded in early Christianity that it could not be ignored.”<sup>47</sup> One can see why this was the case: Jesus was sacrificed (executed) and Barabbas was released.

Barabbas also fills his respective role—that of scapegoat. While most readers assume that Barabbas walks free after his release from Roman custody, a careful reading suggests another possibility. Maclean observes that the combination of the Greek verb *apolyō*, “release,” with the dative *hymīn*, “to you,” “opens up new interpretative possibilities, since releasing a prisoner ‘to them’ or ‘to the crowd’ has rather ominous undertones.”<sup>48</sup> She continues, “we might be inclined to see

44. Mishnah *Yoma* 6:6.

45. See, for example, John P. Galvin, “Jesus as Scapegoat? Violence and the Sacred in the Theology of Raymond Schwager,” *Thomist* 46 (1982): 173–94; and René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

46. Maclean, “Barabbas,” 319, 320. See Heb 9:11–12 and Origen, *Homiliae in Leviticum* 10.2.2.

47. Maclean, “Barabbas,” 321.

48. Maclean, “Barabbas,” 321, 322. Maclean's analysis is based on the Markan narrative

the custom as one of giving up a criminal to the mob for them to enact vengeance upon.”<sup>49</sup> According to Maclean’s reading, Barabbas is not pardoned; rather, he is lynched by the mob, humiliated and mistreated like the scapegoat on its way out of the city.

Once modern exegetical constructs have been removed, “the parallels to the Barabbas narrative are obvious: Two goats (men) are brought before the people; one is killed, the other is released.”<sup>50</sup> In fact, Maclean asserts, “the narrative seems to be constructed to ensure that one is released and the other slain. This feature supports the theory that the narrative was constructed with the rituals of Lev 16 in mind.”<sup>51</sup> Barabbas is the scapegoat; Jesus is the immolated goat. While there may be sins upon Barabbas’s head, it is the sacrifice of Jesus that brings the Day of Atonement’s promised purification from sin. The parallels now move from Jesus’s role as sacrifice to his role as sacrificer.

### *The Intercessory Prayer*

The 17th chapter of John records a prayer offered by Jesus. The contents of this prayer prompted early commentators to recognize its priestly inclination, although the sixteenth-century theologian David Chytraeus was the first to term it as Jesus’s “High Priestly Prayer.”<sup>52</sup> This interpretation is still “generally affirm[ed] by recent scholarship.”<sup>53</sup> Points of contact between Jesus’s prayer and the high priest’s prayer on the Day of Atonement include the prayers’ intercessory genre, their tripartite structure, and their focus on sanctification. The prayer, which precedes Jesus’s entrance into Gethsemane and subsequent arrest, has an “explicit intercessory nature,”<sup>54</sup> recalling interactions between God and many of Israel’s mediators.<sup>55</sup> The prerogative of mediating between YHWH and Israel belonged especially to the high priest, and nowhere is this portrayed more clearly than on

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(and, to a lesser extent, that of Matthew), but the Barabbas narrative is essentially the same in the Fourth Gospel, particularly in the points that I’ve cited. The use of the verb *apolyō* with the dative *hymīn* is common to both Gospels, as is the prisoners’ presentation to the crowd and Pilate’s question as to what should be done with Jesus.

49. Maclean, “Barabbas,” 322.

50. Maclean, “Barabbas,” 313.

51. Maclean, “Barabbas,” 323. Hans Moscicke finds strong evidence to favor this conclusion of Maclean’s, although he stops short of fully endorsing her argument as a whole. See Hans Moscicke, “Jesus as Goat of the Day of Atonement in Recent Synoptic Gospels Research,” *CurBR* 17.1 (2018): 59–85, here 79–80.

52. Marianus Pale Hera, *Christology and Discipleship in John 17* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1–2.

53. Hera, *Christology*, 2.

54. Lunn, “Intertextual Echoes,” 738.

55. See, for example, Moses in Exod 32:11–14, 31–34, Solomon in 1 Kgs 8:27–53, and Hezekiah in 2 Chr 30:18–20.

the Day of Atonement.<sup>56</sup> The rabbinic expansions of Lev 16 have the high priest's offerings accompanied by solemn prayers of intercession: "O Lord, your people, the house of Israel, has committed iniquity, transgressed, and sinned before you. Forgive, O Lord, I pray, the iniquities, transgressions, and sins, which your people, the house of Israel, have committed, transgressed, and sinned before you."<sup>57</sup> Like the high priest, Jesus also pleads his people's case before God: "I am asking on their behalf . . . sanctify them in the truth" (John 17:9, 17).

There are also structural similarities between Jesus's prayer and that of the high priest. Harold Attridge writes, "Most commentators agree that the prayer falls into three major sections, in which Jesus offers three particular petitions."<sup>58</sup> In the first five verses, Jesus prays on his own behalf; he uses the next fourteen to pray for his disciples; and beginning at verse twenty, he prays for those who believe the disciples' teaching. Specifically, he prays that these three beneficiaries—himself, his disciples, and the larger believing community—"may be sanctified in truth" (John 17:19). Attridge notes that the "trifold structure of the prayer evokes for some readers . . . the actions and prayers of the high priest on Yom Kippur,"<sup>59</sup> where the high priest makes atonement "for himself *and* for his house *and* for all the assembly of Israel" (Lev 16:17).<sup>60</sup>

Intercession and structural similarities are not all that suggest allusion; a context of sanctification is also shared by the two passages. The high priest's rites on the Day of Atonement were for the purpose of sanctifying himself, his house, and all Israel; Jesus's prayer is for the sanctification of himself, his disciples (his "house"), and the community of believers (often identified as a "new Israel").<sup>61</sup> Kerr notes that, like that of Lev 16, Jesus's offer of sanctification "is sacrificial language."<sup>62</sup> In genre, structure, and theme, the prayer of John 17 "displays some consistency with the high priestly prayers," particularly those associated with the Day of Atonement.<sup>63</sup> In John 17, Jesus is the high priest, preparing the atoning sacrifice and interceding for his people. Another aspect of the narrative also suggests this: John's use of the Greek phrase *egō eimi*.

56. Exod 28:12, 29; Lev 16:32–34. The author of Hebrews also clearly understands the high priest's Day of Atonement role as one of intercession, and like John, draws analogy between this and Jesus's role. See Heb 5:1–3; 7:25.

57. Mishnah *Yoma* 6:2; see also 3:8; 4:2.

58. Attridge, "High Priestly Prayer," 9.

59. Attridge, "High Priestly Prayer," 9.

60. Emphasis added. See also Mishnah *Yoma* 4:2.

61. Gerald Janzen comments on the shared theme of purification and also connects it with John the Baptist's declaration. See Janzen, "The Scope of Jesus's High Priestly Prayer," 20.

62. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus's Body*, 369.

63. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus's Body*, 322.

*Egō Eimi and the Divine Name*

Possibly in conjunction with the carefully structured presentation of Jesus's miracles, John unfolds his narrative with a series of "I am" statements from the mouth of Jesus. These "I am" logia have been the topic of a wide range of scholarship. The studies—which explore the interplay with synoptic logia, search for context within the wider Jewish and Hellenistic worlds, and draw conclusions about the identity of the Johannine Jesus—reach far beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is worthwhile to touch on a few points of relevance. These cogent points suggest that the sayings may have a context within a Day of Atonement liturgy.

It's clear that "I am," or *egō eimi* in the Greek, often has more meaning than a mere accident of grammar. These sayings of Jesus are "linked to his forgiveness of sins" and "the judgement of his enemies"—both ideas associated with the Day of Atonement—and on several occasions, the words prompt strong reactions.<sup>64</sup> At the temple, when Jesus concludes a discourse with the assertion, "before Abraham was, I am," his listeners respond by trying to stone him (John 8:58–59). And at his arrest in the garden, the declaration, "I am he," causes the arresting party to fall to the ground (John 18:5–6). But this isn't always the case. Sometimes, "I am" simply means "I am." How is one to decide which sayings carry added weight? Their structure may offer some clues.

In John, Jesus's *egō eimi* sayings fall into two categories: those that introduce a metaphorical image<sup>65</sup>—such as "I am the good shepherd"—and those that occur "without an image"<sup>66</sup> and are grammatically independent from the rest of the sentence.<sup>67</sup> While there is some variety within the two patterns, the differences between the two are substantial enough to establish a "clear distinction between the formula[s]."<sup>68</sup> The logia in the second category, termed the "absolute" sayings,<sup>69</sup> are those that typically provoke strong reactions. Many commentators suggest

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64. Williams, *I am He*, 6.

65. John 6:35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5 (7 different images; 14 total occurrences).

66. Ball, *I Am*, 166.

67. John 4:26; 6:20; 8:18, 24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18: 5, 6, 8 (10 total occurrences). Two of these—4:26 and 8:18—have participial predicates and therefore cannot be completely separated from the rest of the sentence, but these sayings' construction is different enough from the first category that they can still be comfortably classified as a part of the "absolute" pattern. Both Ball and Paul Anderson, in their classifications of the Johannine "I am" logia, include 4:26 and 8:18 as part of the "absolute" family. See Anderson, "Origin and Development," 145–46, and Ball, *I Am*, 168–69.

68. Ball, *I Am*, 171.

69. Anderson, "Origin and Development," 144–47.

that these logia, which occur ten times in the Gospel,<sup>70</sup> “display the features of a fixed formula,” although the meaning of this formula is difficult to determine.<sup>71</sup> Grammatically, the phrase “I am” without a predicate is meaningless. Some scholars argue that the absolute sayings amount to a “theophanic formula,” and others, a “form of self-identification.”<sup>72</sup> To understand the weight of the absolute pronouncement “I am” and establish some sort of meaning, the reader must turn to the Septuagint, where two theophanic Old Testament expressions are rendered as *egō eimi*.

In response to Moses’s request for his name, God gives the well-known reply: “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod 3:14). In the Hebrew, this “name” is *’ehyeh ’āšer ’ehyeh*. The word *’ehyeh* comes from the root *hyh*—“to be”—and is also etymologically connected with the divine name YHWH.<sup>73</sup> Since this wordplay “cannot be duplicated in Greek,” the LXX opts for translation rather than transliteration and takes this phrase as *egō eimi ho ōn*—“I am The One Who Is.”<sup>74</sup> The other phrase, *’ānī hū’*, or “I am he,” is most prominent in a series of “declarations pronounced by Yahweh” in Isaiah’s latter half, although the phrase is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>75</sup> Since, in an Isaianic context, it always comes from the mouth of YHWH, this expression has been interpreted as a claim to “divine immutability,” “eternal steadfastness,” “divine sovereignty,” and an “exclusive [claim] to divinity.”<sup>76</sup> And like *’ehyeh*, the LXX translates *’ānī hū’* as *egō eimi*. Although they are separate expressions in the Hebrew, by means of a Greek translation these two theophanic formulas became united into one phrase: *egō eimi*. Whether replacing *’ehyeh ’āšer ’ehyeh* in Exod 3:14 or *’ānī hū’* in Isaiah, *egō eimi* appears to introduce a revelation of divinity. Various scholars within the Septuagint and New Testament fields assert that the LXX translators understood *egō eimi* as a legitimate form of the divine name,<sup>77</sup> “equivalent to YHWH.”<sup>78</sup>

70. Anderson, “Origin and Development,” 145–47; Ball, *I Am*, 168–69. Not all scholars agree about where the line should be drawn, but I agree with Anderson and Ball, who both identify ten total absolute logia.

71. Ball, *I Am*, 166. Note that Ball is citing earlier studies. He himself is cautious about characterizing every case of *egō eimi* as a formula. I agree that not all *egō eimi* sayings are created equal, but I feel that the absolute logia are distinct enough to represent some sort of formula. Ball seems amenable to this idea. See p. 167.

72. Williams, *I am He*, 5.

73. Austin Surls, *Making Sense of the Divine Name in Exodus: From Etymology to Literary Onomastics* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 78–79.

74. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 46, 53.

75. Williams, *I am He*, 23.

76. Williams, *I am He*, 39, 41.

77. Williams, *I am He*, 58.

78. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus’s Body*, 326, 329. This view is debated, but regardless, as

If *egō eimi* in its absolute form was regarded as “a formal epithet for God,” the crowds’ reactions begin to make more sense.<sup>79</sup> As Charles Gieschen writes, “If these absolute [*egō eimi*] sayings were not closely related to the Divine Name, why does one cause the Jews who heard it reach for stones (8.59) and another cause his arresting party to fall to the ground (18.6)?”<sup>80</sup> Rabbinic Judaism forbade pronouncing the divine name, and this likely represents earlier trends.<sup>81</sup> At the one time that the rabbis allowed the name YHWH to be heard—when the high priest offered prayer on the Day of Atonement<sup>82</sup>—their recollection asserts that those who heard “the Expressed Name . . . would kneel, and bow down, and fall on their faces,” recalling the reaction of the arresting party in the garden.<sup>83</sup> In fact, this reaction and three *egō eimi* sayings in the arrest episode may be the key to understanding the Johannine use of the phrase.

The three “I am” logia in the garden (John 18:5, 6, 8) represent the eighth, ninth, and tenth occurrences of *egō eimi* in its absolute form. While on its own, the number ten is intriguing for typological reasons, there is an even more interesting possibility. Rabbinic sources claim that as part of the Day of Atonement’s rites, the divine name was also expressed ten times by the high priest, culminating “at the climax of the service.”<sup>84</sup> Jesus’s ten absolute *egō eimi* declarations may well reflect this tradition of a tenfold ritual repetition by the high priest. If we are to regard *egō eimi* as a legitimate form of this divine name, then it is likely that John’s design with the absolute logia is meant to point his audience to a Yom Kippur tradition that is also preserved by rabbinic memory. Jesus, as both the high priest and the sacrifice, reveals his divine identity by means of Day of Atonement liturgy.

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Catrin Williams summarizes, “there is no doubt that this succinct and rhythmic formulation is intended as a solemn expression of God’s self-declaration” (Williams, *I am He*, 60). Regardless of the LXX translators’ attitude towards *egō eimi*’s relationship with the name YHWH, by using the Septuagint as its primary text, the Greek-speaking Judaism would have attached divine connotations to the phrase. By Jesus’s time, *egō eimi* had been associated with theophany for generations.

79. Janzen, “The Scope of Jesus’s High Priestly Prayer,” 17–18.

80. Charles A. Gieschen, “The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology,” *VC* 57 (2003): 115–58, here 141.

81. Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 7:5. Note the similarities to Mark 14:61–64, which suggest that the Mishnah is preserving elements of a tradition that date back to at least the writing of Mark’s gospel.

82. Rachel Elijor, “Early Forms of Jewish Mysticism,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, 8 vols., ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4:779. Not all scholars agree that this was the only time the name YHWH was pronounced.

83. Mishnah *Yoma* 6:2. See also Williams, *I am He*, 292.

84. Elijor, “Jewish Mysticism,” 778; Tosefta *Kippurim* 2:2, from Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta: Moed* (New York: Ktav, 1981); Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 39b.

## CONCLUSION

As this study moves towards a close, a serious question remains: If the Day of Atonement is part of the narrative design, then why doesn't the author simply state it outright? Duke professor Mark Goodacre makes an argument that can be adapted by analogy to the current issue. He asks about the identity of John's "beloved disciple":

Why is it that so many people across the centuries have assumed that the beloved disciple is John, the son of Zebedee? . . . It's because the text allows the reader—it encourages the reader—to make that very identification. . . . [From what] we know about this character . . . there's only one candidate, and that candidate is, of course, John. . . . John is conspicuous by his absence in the Gospel. He's never mentioned by name and that, therefore, makes him a very obvious candidate to be the beloved disciple in John's gospel. He appears to be present—and this is something that is repeatedly missed in literature on John's gospel—he appears to be present, cloaked in anonymity, in chapter one . . . exactly where you'd expect him.<sup>85</sup>

Goodacre makes an argument by way of exclusion: the beloved disciple plays such an important role—and John is so conspicuously absent—that the text itself suggests that the two should be identified. It's a clever literary ploy, a sort of anonymity that undermines itself with a hint that is simultaneously subliminal and obvious.

It is striking that the Day of Atonement also goes unmentioned in the Fourth Gospel. Out of Second Temple Judaism's four temple-related festivals, Yom Kippur is the only one not explicitly mentioned. Passover,<sup>86</sup> Tabernacles,<sup>87</sup> and even the non-biblical Dedication<sup>88</sup> all receive mention, but the absence of the Day of Atonement is glaring, which, among other things, leads some theologians to declare that "no atonement teaching is found in the Gospel of John."<sup>89</sup> This is not the case. As demonstrated in this study, the Fourth Gospel seems to contain imagery from Yom Kippur. Why, then, does the author fail to mention it?

To paraphrase Goodacre's argument, it may be that the text encourages the reader to identify the Gospel's narrative itself as an unfolding of Yom Kippur's

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85. Mark Goodacre, *The NT Pod: A Historical Approach to the New Testament*, Episode 38: "Who is the Beloved Disciple?" 12 June 2010, <https://podacre.blogspot.com/2010/06/nt-pod-38-who-is-beloved-disciple-in.html>.

86. John 2:23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; 19:14.

87. John 7:2.

88. John 10:22.

89. George L. Carey, "The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories," *TynBul* 32 (1981): 97–122, here 97.



ritual. The Day of Atonement is conspicuous by its absence in the Gospel, but appears to be present, cloaked in anonymity, introduced in chapter one, exactly where you'd expect it. If John's Gospel is the Day of Atonement, the reader's first clue is John the Baptist's declaration, and the arrest is the culminating moment in the revelation of Jesus's identity. The passion narrative begins with the end of the *egō eimi* sayings, and from there, the parallels only grow stronger.

Other topics remain to be explored. Does Jesus's washing of his disciples' feet in John 13 correspond to the priestly washings and immersions on the Day of Atonement and elsewhere?<sup>90</sup> Is the otherwise puzzling mention of Jesus's cloak at the crucifixion actually a veiled allusion to the high priest's linen Yom Kippur garb?<sup>91</sup> The high priest was to be kept up all night on the eve of the holy day and have scriptures read to him; how does this compare with John's account of Jesus's final night?<sup>92</sup> John and Hebrews both seem to tap into an early Christian tradition that portrays Jesus as both high priest and sacrificial victim. Do other sources corroborate this? Are there any other meaningful interactions between the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Fourth Gospel? All of these are interesting and potentially valuable avenues for further research.

However, the elements and connections treated in this paper are substantial enough to suggest calculated interplay between the Gospel of John and Jewish ritual. John the Baptist's declaration, the Barabbas narrative, the Intercessory Prayer, and the tenfold repetition of *egō eimi* demonstrate the possibility that the author of John deliberately incorporated themes from the Day of Atonement into his narrative. One of the arguments of the Gospel, then, is that the death of Jesus carries the salvific weight of Israel's atoning rituals. Jesus's role, in the eyes of the author of John, is to purify his community through his removal of their sins.

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90. Compare John 12:3–8; 13:3–20 with Lev 16:4, 23–24 and Mishnah *Yoma* 3:2–5.

91. Lunn, "Intertextual Echoes," 742–43.

92. Compare John 18–19 with Mishnah *Yoma* 1:4–7.