Aron Pinker, A Goat to Go to Azazel
1. INTRODUCING THE QUESTION

The ritual of the scapegoat is described in Lev 16:5–26. Each step of the ritual is clear, yet it remains enigmatic to this day. Ehrlich succinctly summarized the situation saying, “Azazel—No one knows who he is or what he is. What previous scholarship said about him has no substance and cannot be relied upon.” This is also true at the present time, almost a century later.

Scholars focused their attention mostly on understanding the term Azazel (אלוהא), which occurs only in Lev 16:8, 10 (2t), and 26, and on the occurrence of similar rituals in other ancient Near-East cultures to reveal its origins and purpose. Yet, the ritual poses a number of perplexing problems in addition to the studied issues. How is the ritual related to atonement? Why were just two he-goats prescribed as atonement for the entire congregation of Israel rather than a bull (Lev 4:13–15)? Why were lots cast to select the scapegoat? What was the status of all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites that were symbolically placed on the scapegoat’s head? Were these sins forgiven, or in suspension? Why was the sacrifice of a single he-goat as a sin offering insufficient? Was each of the he-goats supposed to take care of the same kind of iniquities and transgressions? Why only on the Day of Atonement sacrifice is this ritual of a scapegoat enacted? Why was the ritual changed in the time of the Second Temple (m. Yoma 6:4–6)?

Albright collected material on the scapegoat ritual for years, but except for some remarks on this topic never published anything comprehensive.

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1 The term “scapegoat” was coined by the translators of the King James Bible because they did not know how to translate the Hebrew term Azazel. The translators understood the ה in הוהא (Lev 16:10) in the sense “as a” rather than “to.”


Certainly, the complexity of the issues associated with the scapegoat ritual is rather daunting. In this paper I will try to discuss the scapegoat ritual within the framework of competing notions of God’s abode on earth. I hope to show that within this framework many of the questions posed find a natural explanation.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Meaning of Azazel (אזהר)

2.1.1 Introduction

Already the Versions struggled with the term אזהר, trying to harmonize between the practice of the ritual at the time of the second Temple and the meaning of the name. The Septuagint translates ἀποπομπατσία ("for the one carrying away the evil") in Lev 16:8, τοῦ ἀποπομπατσίου and τὴν ἀποπομπατήν in Lev 16:10, using a newly coined word. Such a sense would fit the context and usage. In Lev 16:26 it has for ἀναστάλμενον εἰς ἁφέσιν ("that has been set apart to be let go"). This appears to be an attempt at explaining what the term means. Thus, אזהר only describes a function, which is “set apart to let go.”

In MT אזהר occurs twice in Lev 16:10. However, the Samaritan Bible has in Lev 16:10 once אזהר instead of אזהר, though it agrees with MT in all the other cases. This might be a scribal error, or a case that escaped a later editor’s deliberate change of אזהר into אזהר. The Peshitta has in Lev 16 אזהר (Azazel),5 Targum Onqelos אזהר, and the Temple Scroll (11 QTemple 26:13) and other texts (4Q180 1 7–8 [2 times])6 at Qumran contain:

4 Wevers, J. W. Notes on the Greek Text of Leviticus. SCS 41 Atlanta: Scholars Press (1997) 244.
6 Allegro, J. M. “Some Unpublished Fragments of Pseudepigraphical Literature from Qumran’s Fourth Cave.” The Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society IV. Leiden (1964). These fragments from Qumran’s Fourth Cave have been collated in two documents. Document I line 7 contains the following: המש על כל המחבלים ארבע [ע]ד לבה נברם. Allegro felt that these fragments are “of the wealth of the pseudepigraphical literature that must have been circulating within Judaism at the turn of the era.” Hoenig disputes Allegro’s assertion. In his view “these new documents belong to the period of early medieval Midrash, and Karaitic teachings, and are not to be included into the literature of the Second Commonwealth” (Hoenig, S. B. “The New Qumran Pesher on Azazel.” JQR 56 [1966] 253).
tain the form יָצָא. Symmachus and Aquila in Lev 16:10 use τοπφρος for יָצָא, i.e., a designation associated with going or sending. In Lev 16:8 Aquila uses for יָצָא a term that means “strong.” Zipor felt that Symmachus and Aquila had in mind the following, יָצָא + יְעָל. The Vulgate’s caper emissarius considers יָצָא a description of the goat, as the Septuagint does. As in the MT, יָצָא or יָצָא seem to be names of some entity. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan in its translation for Lev 16:10 supplies an explanation for the second יָצָא = יָצָא: יָצָא עֵדָה (a hard and difficult place); i.e., the word characterizes the place to which the goat was taken. It is interesting to note that Tg.-Ps.-J. Gen 6:4 explains שְׁמוּאֵל יָצָא היה נֶפֶל מִן שֵׁמֶה, again using the form יָצָא.

Scholars believed that if the meaning of Azazel could be deciphered all would fall in place. However, to this day the meaning of Azazel eludes categorical definition. The approaches that have been adopted for interpreting the term Azazel essentially fell into four types: name of a supernatural entity, name or description of a place, abstract noun, description of the dispatched goat, and, miscellaneous opinions.

### 2.1.2 Name of a Supernatural Entity

This approach capitalizes on the parallelism יָצָא + יָצָא in Lev 16:8 and the fact that the scapegoat was sent out into the wilderness, which was considered to be one of the abodes of supernatural entities (Hab 3:3, Isa 13:21, 34:11–15).

In m. Yoma 6:1 Azazel is understood as a being, as clearly shown by יָצָא + יָצָא: יָצָא “and if that of Azazel died.” This is also the dominant opinion in the Midrashic literature from the early post Biblical period to the very late Midrashim.

In 1 Enoch, Azazel is the tenth in the list of fallen

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8 Zipor, 135. Though יָצָא is Aramaic it occurs in Prov 20:14 and Job 14:11.
9 Kluger, R. S. Satan in the Old Testament. Evanston: Northwestern University Press (1967) 44. The author notes that “the wilderness was already in the Babylonian conception the abiding-place of demons. This is shown by the following incantation against the evil Alu:

*Evil Alu, go to the desert place!*

*Your dwelling is a destroyed ruin.*

angels and is the source of all evil and corruption. Azazel appears as a full-fledged demonic being in 1Enoch 8:1–2, 9:6, 10:4–8 and 13:1. In a later Midrash one finds, “the lot of the Lord is a burnt offering, and the lot of Azazel is a goat as a sin offering” (Pirque Rabbi Eliezer 46). The Midrash tells that “Aza’el did not repent and still remains in his perverted state, corrupting the people by means of the multi-colored dress (attire) of women” (Yalkut Shimoni on Genesis 44). References to Azazel as an entity can be found in Sifra (on Ahare Mot 2:8), Tob 8:3, and Matt 12:43. In later literature Azazel is identified as Samael or Satan. Azazel as Satan tempts the people of the world into sinning and for this reason the scapegoat was sacrificed to him on the Day of Atonement.

It is possible that some of the Israelites portrayed in Deut 32:16–17 thought that rendering worship to minor semi-divine spirits was quite compatible with their faith and loyalty to the God of their ancestors. Perhaps, similar reasoning can be detected in the opinions of the medieval Jewish exegetes Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides. Ibn Ezra gives essentially two explanations for הייאַבג. His mystical (תל) explanation alludes to the demonic

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12 The relevant verses in 1Enoch tell: “And to Raphael he said, ‘Bind Asael hand and foot and throw him into darkness. Make an opening in the wilderness, which is in Dadouel, and throw him into it. Place rough, sharp stones under him and cover the darkness over him. Let him reside there forever; cover his countenance and let no light shine. In the day of great judgment he will be led away to conflagration. And the earth, which the angels ruined will be healed. ... All the earth was made barren, ruined through the works of the teaching; of Azazel, so write on him all sins.”
13 The text makes it clear that the reference is to the Azazel in the Scriptures, “Yet Azazel persisted obdurately in his sin of leading mankind astray... For this reason two he-goats were sacrificed on the day of Atonement, the one for the Lord, that He pardoned the sins of Israel, the other for Azazel, that he bear the sins of Israel and this is Azazel of the Torah.” Note that it is assumed here that the scapegoat is a sacrifice to Azazel (Samael) intended to bribe him, so that he would mute his accusations.
14 Jellinek, A. Beth ha-Midrash, IV. Wien: Schlossberg (1865) 127.
15 Shiloni, Y. (Ed.). Yalkut Shimoni I. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook (1973) 155. It is not clear from the text whether the scapegoat was considered a sacrifice.
16 Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Lev 16:8 reads: “Rabbi Shmuel [R. Shmuel Ben
nature of Azazel and his simple (משה) explanation considers a name of a place. Nachmanides note that Ibn Ezra did not have to obscure his mystical explanation because it has been revealed in many places.\(^\text{17}\) He also believed that Azazel was one of the demons or one of God’s angels (servants).\(^\text{18}\)

Standard English translations in general consider \(\text{נואל}\) an entity. KJV uses for its coined term ‘scapegoat’ in Lev 16:8 and 26 (for the scapegoat) understanding it as an entity. NASB also uses “for the scapegoat” in Lev 16:8 and first \(\text{נואל}\) in Lev 16:10. HNV has “for the scapegoat” for each occurrence of \(\text{נואל}\). JB notes that Azazel is a demon of the desert and uses Azazel in the translation. NJPS leaves \(\text{נואל}\) untranslated, a name of some entity.

Hofni c. 997–1013] said, ‘Although it is (only) with reference to the goat of the sin-offering that it is written (explicitly) that it was for the Lord, the scapegoat was also for the Lord.’ But there is no need for this (comment). For the goat which was sent away was not an offering since it was not slaughtered. Now if you can understand the secret of the word after Azazel, you will know its secret and the secret of its name, since it has parallels in the Scriptures. And I will reveal to you part of the secret by hint: when you will be thirty-three, you will know it.” The clue, to count 33 verses from this verse, brings us to Lev 17:7 “they may offer their sacrifices no more to the goat-demons.” Ibn Ezra clearly considered Azazel a demon. However, it seems that in a different version of his commentary Ibn Ezra considered Azazel to be a heavenly constellation, according to Abarbanel (cf. Abarbanel’s seventh question in his commentary on the Torah, where he says:

\(\text{ומני משיחי נואלANI למשיחי השמחים וכרבי הרכה}\\)

\(^\text{17}\) In Nachmanides’ commentary on Lev 16:8 one reads: “Now the Torah has absolutely forbidden to accept them (angels) as deities, or to worship them in any manner. However, the Holy One, blessed be He, commands us that on the Day of Atonement we should let loose a goat in the wilderness, to that ‘prince,’ which rules over wastelands, and this (goat) is fitting for it because he is its master, and destruction and waste emanate from his power, which in turn is the cause of the stars of the sword, wars quarrels, wounds, plagues, division and destruction... Also in his portion are the devils called ‘destroyers’ in the language of our Rabbis, and in the language of our Scriptures ‘satyrs (demons)’).” In Nachmanides’ view Azazel is the angel Samael or Satan, one of God’s servants, to whom God commands to give a portion of God’s own sacrifice. Samael gets a bribe (шение) that he might not annul the effect of Israel’s offerings.

Most modern scholars believe that Azazel is a supernatural entity of ancient origin connected to demons, believed to live in the desert, and the ritual is an adaptation of purification rites of the ancient Near-East. Duhm felt that Azazel is the leader of the שעריאים, a desert-goblin. Cheyne considered Azazel the leader of the fallen angels to which Enoch refers. The name of this angel has been deliberately changed from נוֹזָל “out of reverence, to conceal the true derivation of the fallen angel’s name.” Albright noted the parallels between the scapegoat and the Greek Pan and the satyrs as well as a number of Southwest-Asiatic goat deities. He felt that it is impossible to separate the שעריאים from the scapegoat. It seemed reasonable to Albright “to suppose that popular fancy identified the scapegoat with the class of goat demons, giving rise to objectionable ideas which later ritual eliminated by the expedient of killing the goat.” De Vaux also thought that Azazel is a supernatural being associated with demons.

It should be noted that there is a significant difference between שעריאים and שעריא נוֹזָל. Felix identifies שעריא as the “scops owl” (Otus scops), a small bird of prey. Its inclined posture, the two horn-shaped crests of hair-like feathers on its head, hopping, dance-like gait, recall the long-hair goat (שעריא נוֹזָל). This might have led to some semantic confusion between the two. In Isa 13:21, which has been often quoted in support of a demonic Azazel, it seems contextually more natural to understand, ושעריא נוֹזָל שמ.

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25 Albright, W. F. “The High Place in Ancient Palestine.” VTSup 4 (1956) 245–6. Albright says, “The שעריאים were naturally rustic deities, originally goat demons, and evidently included a heterogeneous lot of old pagan divinities, which were still worshipped, or at least venerated, in rustic areas, farthest removed from the influence of militant Yahwism.” He adds, “It seems reasonable to suppose that popular fancy identified the scapegoat with the class of goat demons, giving rise to objectionable ideas which later ritual eliminated by the expedient of killing the goat.”
26 Felix, J. The Animal World of the Bible. Tel Aviv: Sinai (1962) 80
“and the Scops Owl shall dance there.” Similarly, נאום אל ערה חיה in Isa 34:14 is “and the Scops Owl shall cry to his fellow.” Perhaps this verse alludes to the male’s hooting during the hatching period, which sounds like a moan. The Scops Owl apparently symbolized some devil and was worshipped. However, the association of the נאום אל ערה with demons, via the נאום, is not warranted.27

In Tawil’s opinion the term נאום אל ערה consists of אל ערה and נאום having the meaning “a fierce god.” He thinks “the spelling of this word as employed in the MT seems to be a scribal metathesis deliberately altered to conceal the true demonic nature of this supernatural being.”28 There is some support for this position in the Samaritan Bible and the Peshitta. Tawil proposes to identify נאום אל ערה with Mot, the Canaanite god of the underworld.29 Zadok was able to show that the Neoassyrian Ab-di-a-zu-zi and Phoenician bd ‘azz are theophoric personal names in which בז is a divinity, as נאום אל ערה = נאום אל ערה (‘Els strength” or “God’s power”).30 Some base the name נאום אל ערה on a posited Egyptian q3dr/l (“the expelled culprit”), associating the Israelite ritual with elements of the Egyptian religion pertaining to demons (in some respects resembling Seth).31

Tawil’s position has been adopted by Zatelli. She says, “Perhaps the spelling נאום אל ערה in Qumran texts is acceptable for נאום אל ערה; it has been changed

29 Tawil, H. “Azazel the Prince of the Steepe [sic]: A Comparative Study.” ZAW 92 (1980) 58. Tawil makes the assumption that מות–נאום = מות–נאום = מות+(is fierce) and that מות–נאום = מות–נאום = מות+(is fierce) obtaining Demon=Mot. Certainly in the HB מות could mean the “angel of death.” However, it is questionable whether this is the meaning in מות. Further, while Tawil gives an extensive presentation of Babylonian beliefs in demons, their raging and ferocity, abode in wasteland and netherworld, and source of sickness and misery, he fails to establish any plausible links between these many beings and the מות of the HB. Finally, the switch from Babylonian to Canaanite mythology, as if they were just one and the same, is not justified.
into the more neutral נאותל in the textus receptus. Probably it was originally a kind of Canaanite demon—which developed in the Hebrew tradition—connected with the chthonian power expressed by goats. The wilderness is a symbol of the underworld.”

2.2.3 Name or Description of a Place

This approach capitalizes on the correspondence in Lev 16:22 between נאותל, אארין, and נאותו. Tg. Ps.-J. Lev 16:10, which reads as follows: הנאותל משך ונקט בהר נאותו translates as “in a rough and hard place in the desert at a cliff that is in Beit Hadure” drawing on b. Yoma 67b and m. Yoma 6:8. The discussion in b. Yoma is summarized in Sifra (on Abare Mot 2:8):

לแปลול למסים מכסה בחרים. י inversión ת뤭פום תמר ומדרביה. מנין שחייה בין

The text there explains that נאותל is a hard to access mountain precipice exploiting the biblical details, namely נmaresה (thus not in an urban place) and לא נידרכ אארין (thus to a precipice).

Sa’adiah has rendered נאותו “to the Mount הנאותו,” as in Ps 36:7 or יקתו לא הנאותו in 2Kgs 14:7, consisting of a descriptor and hence read for exaggeration. Ibn Ezra’s simple (משת) explanation for הנאותו seems to be “name of a mountain near Mount Sinai,” to which the goat was chased and then pushed off. Thus, the ritual during the Second Commonwealth was no different from in the desert. Kimchi explains that Azazel is the name of the mountain to which the goat was led (אארין + ט), and because the goat was led there the mountain acquired this name. Rashi, following the description in b. Yoma 67b, takes Azazel as a “precipitous place” or “rugged cliff,” reading for הנאותו. Rashbam understands that the scapegoat was sent to the desert where goats pasture (Ex 3:1), as in the case of the birds of a leper (Lev 14:7) [Also cleansing a house suspect of being infected Lev 14:53]. The term נאותו here carries a positive meaning, it is a grazing place sustaining life, and not the forsaken “out-place.” R. Behai says that the simple meaning of נאותו is “hard.”

Driver, who adopts Sa’adiah’s interpretation, considers the as formative, similar to its use in בכר (from נאותו) and בכר (from נאותו). He finds similarities between נאותו (or הלס) and the Arabic ‘azâzu(n) “rough ground” or ‘azâzilu “jagged cliff/precipice.”

32 Zatelli, 262–263.
Milgrom felt that “in pre-Israelite practice he [זָאזָאֶל] surely was a true demon, perhaps a satyr (cf. Ibn Ezra on Lev 16:8), who ruled in the wilderness—in the Priestly ritual he is no longer a personality but just a name, designating the place to which impurities and sins are banished.”

Milgrom devotes a whole section to “Azazel and Elimination Rites in the Ancient Near East,” yet none of the Hittite and Mesopotamian rites that he mentions are associated with an entity called Azazel (or similar name). Demonolatry was universal and deeply rooted in ancient religions. Some Israelites apparently worshipped various ‘spirits’ and the Hebrew Bible warns against these practices (Ex 20:4–5, 22:19, Deut 5:7–8). “However, within the world of Pentateuchal traditions, demonolatry was construed as a practice that the Israelites have acquired only in Goshen or the desert, and could not have too deep roots (Deut 32:17). Moreover, there is no evidence in the Hebrew Bible or Ancient Near East literature for a demonic entity called הָאָטָלָל that would warrant Milgrom’s confidence.

2.2.4 ABSTRACT NOUN

Roskoff considered Azazel as the personification of impurity. He says, “Azazel is not a power to whom a sacrifice would be offered in atonement, and the dualism which suggests itself through him is only shadowy. He is merely the qualification of abstract impurity as against the absolute purity of YHWH; he is only a shadow image without reality against the solely real power of YHWH.”

BDB understand הָאָטָלָל as an abstract noun such as “destruction” or “entire removal.”

Gesenius says “I have no doubt that it should be rendered averter (אֶפְרִישׁ, from the root אָפָר, to remove, to separate).”

Hertz accepts Gesenius’ view and translates והָאָטָלָל as “dismissal.”

Janowski and Wilhelm found similarities between the הָאָטָלָל ritual and South Anatolian North Syrian ancient practices, in which donkeys and birds were used as substitutes for humans to appease an angry deity. They con-
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sider לְהָאָלֶה a metathesized form of the original לְהָאָל הָאָלֶה = “divine anger.”

Concerning יֵע Janowski and Wilhelm (158) say: “Im Westsemitischen, so im Ugaritischen und Hebräischen, bezeichnet die Wurzel ebenfalls oft eine göttliche Qualität, die aber nicht in der Weise des Akkadischen negativ Festgelegt ist, sondern auf die Macht und Starke abhebt, die sich freilich auch hart und zornig veräußern kann.” Yet, Janowski and Wilhelm do not give any evidence in support of the idea that יֵע or יֶע can express God’s powerful wrath.

De Roo tries to rectify this omission reintroducing a similar notion. He quotes Ezra 8:22, Ps 66:3, 90:11, and Isa 42:25 in support of his contention that “a plausible rendering for the word יֵע is ‘furious power’ or ‘powerful wrath’.” Unfortunately his effort is of no consequence, since the quoted cases do not support his thesis. In Ezra 8:22 יֵע יֶע clearly indicates that “strength” and “anger” are two separate qualities; in Ps 66:3 יֵע does not warrant his translation “your furious power” as evidenced by standard English translations, which uniformly render יֵע “your power/strength” (cf. KJV, NKJV, NLT, NIV, ESV, NASB, RSV, ASV, Young, Darby, Webster, HNV, JB, NJPS); in Ps 90:11 יֵע is “power/strength of your anger” not “furious power of your anger”; and, in Isa 42:25 יֵע does not parallel יֵע, rather יֵע יֶע is the latter and יֵע יֶע are two construct forms in a list. No wonder Janowski and Wilhelm did not quote any biblical sources. De Roo says, “The first goat is for YHWH: it will be offered to him as a sacrifice. The second goat is ‘for the powerful wrath of God’, that is ‘for placating God’s anger’.”

Kluger says, “Azazel, originally probably an ancient demonic deity, is now nothing more than a concept, still extant as such, but largely hollowed out. He is no more than a symbol of the desert.” Recently, Dietrich and Loretz argued that יֵע originally meant “for the removal of God’s an-

2.2.5 Description of the Dispatched Goat

Many consider Azazel to be a combination of גלעך “the goat that goes,” which would be a description of the goat. The Septuagint and the Vulgate seem to support this position. R. Behai (13th–14th century) considers both goats presents to God, one being slaughtered and the other sent free to the desert as in the ritual for a person cleared of leprosy, where one of the birds is set free (Lev 14:2–9). Thus, the scapegoat has been designated לועזאלו because it was sent into the desert.

KJV uses its coined term ‘(e)scapegoat’ as a description of the dispatched goat in Lev 16:10 (to be the scapegoat, for a scapegoat). NKJV seems to consider ‘scapegoat’ everywhere a description, using it in the phrases for the scapegoat (serve as a scapegoat?), to be the scapegoat, as the scapegoat. NLT and NIV understand azazel = ‘scapegoat’ as “the goat of removal.” NASB uses “for the scapegoat” for the first הנועזאלו and “as the scapegoat” for the second הנועזאלו in Lev 16:10 and in Lev 16:26. Young renders הנועזאלו “a goat of departure.”

2.2.6 Miscellaneous Notions

1. R. Isaac says, "This is Esau as it is written (Gen 27:11); this is Esau as it is written (Gen. Rab. 65:10). The rite on the Day of Atonement symbolizes the transfer of Israel’s sins to its sworn enemies the Edomites, descendants of Esau.

2. The scapegoat is called להנועזאלו because it brings atonement for the deeds of זיאו and דיאא (b. Yoma 67b), symbolically sins of incest. In this explanation הנועזאלו = זיאו + דיאא. Rashi explains “Uzza and Azel are demonic angels who came down

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44 According to the Midrash (Deut. Rab. 11) Uzza and Azel were “the divine beings [who] saw how beautiful the daughters of man were and took wives from
The Gaon (917–926 CE) R. Mevaser Kahana Bar R. Kimoi read לִזְיוּנֶה instead of לִזְיוֹנֶה assuming that the ה was inserted between the כ and כ to ease the pronunciation (apud Ibn Ezra on Lev 16:8).

According to Isaac of Antioch, the pagan Arabs worshiped the Venus Star under the title Al-'Uzza “The Strong (Female),” and Syrian women ascended the roof tops to pray to the star to make them beautiful. Grintz suggested that the Aza’el or Uza of 1Enoch 8:1 is none other than the goddess Al-'Uzza. Indeed, Enoch tells that Aza’el taught men to make among other things bracelets, and ornaments, and the use of antimony, and the beautifying of eyelids, and all kinds of costly stones, and all coloring tinctures.

Azazel is no ordinary demon, but a deity to be propitiated on equal footing with Yahweh. The sending of the goat for Azazel (= ‘Uzza, “Strong Lady,” i.e. ‘Astart-Anat) to the wilderness or steppe-land (midbar) is appropriate for the goddess whose Akkadian title was belit seri, “Lady of the Steppe.”

Some Standard English translations (ESV, RSV, ASV, Darby) leave Azazel untranslated, implying by the capitalization that it is an entity.

Tertullian suggested that the two goats represent Jesus. He says, “The two goats, which were offered at the Fast, are not these also figures of Christ’s two activities? The goats have to be alike, because both represent Christ. According to Tertullian, the goat ‘driven into perdition’ (a clear reference to the goat for Azazel) marks the Lord’s suffering: he was ‘cursed among those that pleased them” (Gen 6:2).


Pope, 315.
and spit upon and pulled about and pierced.” The other goat symbolizes Christ’s offering for sin.”

8. Carmichael suggests that the Azazel rite has a commemorative function. It harks back to the concealment of a transgression by the sons of Jacob with regard to Joseph. The rite is intended to imply that the descendants of Israel should not conceal their offenses, but should confess them when seeking forgiveness.


10. Rudman shifts the focus from מדרב to שׁוֹא אָנָּא, claiming that the ritual as described by P, cleanses Israel (understood as a microcosm of creation) of sin (understood as chaos), and removes it outside creation itself into the chaotic area of wilderness.

2.2.6 Conclusions:

1. Most scholars are comfortable with the notion that שׁוֹא אָנָּא has

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50 Carmichael, C. “The Origin of the Scapegoat Ritual.” *I & T* 50,2 (2000), 167–181. Carmichael’s basic thesis is that all the laws in the Hebrew Bible stem from actual episodes found in Genesis-2Kings. At some time an anonymous lawgiver invented the nation’s ancient laws by reviewing the historical episode and judging them according to his own ethical and legal thinking.

51 Fauth, 534.

52 Rudman, D. “A note on the Azazel-goat ritual.” *ZAW* 116 (2004) 400. The shift of focus from שׁוֹא אָנָּא to מדרב obviates שׁוֹא אָנָּא, which occurs three times in the MT. Also, the ultimate destination of the scapegoat is נְהָרַי הָאָרְץ “precipitous area,” which presumably the scapegoat could reach, not the desert per se. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the Hebrew Bible ever considers “desert” as chaos, according to the definition given by Radmen, which is on a par with the mythological sea monsters. Finally, Rudmen’s notion of “desert” that is part of the creation as being uncreated, “places which God’s creative power has failed to penetrate” (see p. 399) seems contradictory.
been originally an epithet of a demonic personality,\textsuperscript{53} which over time degenerated into a representation of “the geographical goal of the scapegoat's dispatch,” because the figure became peripheral and impotent.\textsuperscript{54} However, it seems inconceivable that Israel's monotheistic religion would give equal footing, in a major annual rite in the Temple, to a competing demonic personality, even of reduced potency and significance.\textsuperscript{55} Segal seems correct in saying, “It is also incredible that a priestly writer would have embodied in the Book of Leviticus a divine command to offer a sacrifice to a demon just immediately before the divine oracle in chapter 17 denouncing the sacrifices to the se’irim.”\textsuperscript{56}

2. The theory that Azazel is the name of a place in the desert rules itself out, since its juxtaposition to the name of God obviously points to a personal being. Attempts to associate with a specific place, or characterization of a place, seem to aim at forming a bridge between an old concept and new practices.

3. There is ample evidence in the Versions, midrashic sources, Qumran scrolls, pseudepigraphic literature, and later sources\textsuperscript{57} that biblical originally was the homophone (“strong God”).\textsuperscript{58} While late post-biblical sources cannot di-

\textsuperscript{53} Wright, D. P. “Azazel.” In \textit{Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)}, I. (1992) 536–567.
\textsuperscript{55} Duhm, H. \textit{Die bösen Geister im Alten Testament}. Tübingen and Leipzig: (1904) 28, 32.
\textsuperscript{56} Segal, M. H. “The Religion of Israel before Sinai.” \textit{JQR} ns 53 (1962/63) 251–252.
\textsuperscript{57} Fauth, W. “Auf den Spuren des biblischen ‘Azazel (Lev 16) Einige Residuen
\textsuperscript{58} Fauth, 521. Fauth says, “der name ‘Aza(z)el in seinem verschiedenen for- malen bzw. Orthographischen Ausprägungen überwiegend Engeln eignet, die ihrer Natur nach als einem Hochgott, zum Beispiel dem alttestamentlichen Herrn der (Streit)kräfte” (Ps 59:5 Ἁδησ ὁ θεός τῶν διναμεων) unterstellte und auf sein Geheiß handelnde Potenzen minderen Ranges (διναμεις) innerhalb der Arkan- und Magiesphäre dessen “Macht” repräsentieren, worauf der Name Ἁδησ “Kraft Els” oder “El [ist] stark”) von sich aus hindeutet.” De Roo (235) also claims that “The idea that Ἁδησ is a metathesized form of Ἄζαζελ is very plausible.”
rectly attest to the original form of writing הָאָזָזֶל, and in particular whether it was הָאָזָזֶל, they indicate that the variously derived orthographic forms predominantly refer to angels, the nature of which is God-like and who act on God’s behalf. Since the terms יָוֶן or יָוהֵן are associated with the deity, it would be reasonably to assume the same for הָאָזָזֶל. What was the motivation for the metathesis is less clear. If the metathesis is assumed late, it might have been occasioned by a wish to more closely tie the later practice of the ritual with the designation of a goat. If the metathesis is assumed early, it was perhaps motivated by an attempt to divert the Israelites from a desert dwelling deity (הָאָזָזֶל) and direct them to the Temple dwelling deity.

4. It seems reasonable to conclude that the ritual described in Lev 16:5–26 was to the same God, identified as הוהי and הָאָזָזֶל, respectively.

2.3 SUPPORT FOR THE CONCLUSIONS FROM SIMILAR RITUALS

The conclusion advanced in the previous section is bolstered by an analysis of rites in other ancient cultures that have some similarity with the scapegoat rite, even if there is no known rite in other ancient cultures that closely resemble the rite of the scapegoat described in the HB, nor do any of the potentially relevant rites mention a supernatural figure whose name is Azazel (or any name close to it).

This said, the concept of B assuming the inconveniences of A and thereby leaving A unencumbered is psychologically very appealing. The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni on Bereshit 44) says: “The sins are sent to Azazel, so that he may carry them.” Such rituals were probably practiced since early antiquity to this day. The following are some potentially relevant examples:

1. In the 14th and 13th centuries BCE, in Mesopotamia as well as in the Hittite kingdom, when unfavorable astrological omens threatened the life of a ruler, a prisoner was chosen, anointed and invested with royal insignia,
and installed as a substitute king. He was then sent to a
distant land. It was believed that this ceremony averted
the danger to the King and transferred it to the scape-
goat.60

2. At the festival of Akitu, the Babylonian New Year, a goat
in lieu of a human was sacrificed to Ereshkigal, the god-
ess of the abyss or netherworld.

3. An Assyrian document dealing with the case of a person
who could not drink or eat suggests tying a he-goat to his
bed and transferring the disease to the goat. On the next
morning the he-goat was to be taken to the desert, his
head cut, meat cooked and with honey and fats put into a
hole.61

4. The Hittite in time of a plague used to send a ram,
crowned with colorful wool, to the enemy land, so that it
would transfer the plague there.

5. The Roman year began on the Ides of March. On that
day, a man clad in skins was driven through the streets of
Rome, beaten with rods, and driven out of the city.

6. For additional cases see Milgrom, Tawil, Wright, Zitteli,
and particularly Eberhart, etc.62

In many of these rituals an offended or angry deity or demons must be
propitiated so that a plague or other evil might be averted or lifted from
mankind or an individual. The offerings made are of appeasement and sub-
stitution intended to assuage the demonic wrath. Wright rightly notes that
Leviticus 16 does not speak of Azazel in any of these terms.63 Indeed,

60 Kümmel, H. M. Ersatzrituale für den hethitischen König. StBoT 3. Weisbaden
Harrassowitz (1967) 111–12.

61 Ebeling, E. Tod und Leben nach den Vorstellungen der Babylonier. Berlin:
DeGruyter (1931) 73–75.

62 Eberhart, Ch. Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer im Alten Testament. Die Signifikanz

63 Wright claims that Azazel receives no offerings (the scapegoat is not a sacri-
fice) and prayers are not made to him. This is debatable (cf. Volgger, 258–9). He
says, “Such a laconic treatment of Azazel in view of these other rituals suggests
that Azazel is not an active being that is due any sort of veneration or attention.”
Yet, Azazel is clearly venerated. Wright suggests that the reason that he [Azazel]
was retained in the Priestly version of the rite may be due to popular belief which
would not allow total expunging of the personality. One would think that the
Azazel, on the Day of Atonement is not angry or offended, he causes no harm, and he is not malicious. In fact, on this day Azazel as a deity is no different from God. As YHWH, he also receives a sin-offering, which is a he-goat, just as YHWH’s. Moreover, the he-goat is selected by lot to eliminate any bias or preference. The goat to YHWH was presented at YHWH’s abode—the Temple, Azazel’s goat was presented to Azazel at the latter’s abode—the desert. This is the essence of the thesis in this paper, which would be elaborated in subsequent sections.

2.4 Appendix: Azazel in Later Sources


I have mentioned that in 1Enoch, the demonic fallen angel Azazel is considered the source of all the sin and evil on earth. This would correspond to a personification of the ירôle “bad inclination.” God commands the angel Raphael to exterminate Azazel the source of all iniquities and corruption and thus purify the land. Raphael is instructed to bind Azazel hand and foot, make an opening in the desert, which is in Dudael, and cast him there onto the darkness. Raphael should also place upon Azazel rough and jagged rocks, and cover him with darkness, and let him dwell there forever, and cover his face that he may not see light.

Hanson finds direct links between the binding of Azazel in 1Enoch 10 and the rite of purgation associated with the scapegoat. Azazel is being treated in a way similar to that of demons and other hostile powers in Akkadian magical and incantation texts. Why did the author of 1Enoch link the

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Priestly version, which has very little to say about demons, would be more anxious to expunge such reference, yet nowhere else but in Leviticus is Azazel mentioned. Wright’s mistake was in comparing Azazel only with the supernatural beings in similar rites, rather than with God in the Day of Atonement rite.

64 Fauth, 534.  
goat designated “for Azazel” with Azazel? Helm suggests that the answer to this question could be found in the fact that “the scapegoat was regarded the focus of evil, a visible representative of the demonic.”

He speculates that in addition to Leviticus 16 existed an oral tradition upon which both Leviticus 16 and Enoch drew, since Azazel is introduced abruptly in Leviticus 16, as if assuming general knowledge. However, it seems that stories about Fallen Angels were not circulating during the Second Commonwealth.

In the Apocalypse of Abraham (80–100 CE?) Azazel is also portrayed as a fallen angel and tempter of humankind. Azazel is described as an unclean bird that flies down on the carcasses of the animals sacrificed by Abraham and starts a verbal dispute with Abraham. He is rebuked by an angel and called “wickedness” (Apoc. Ab. 13:7). Azazel is depicted as an evil spirit. The image of Adam’s and Eve’s temptation, refers to a winged snake that tempts as Azazel (Apoc. Ab. 23:12).

A number of attributes commonly associated with Satan appear in the depictions of Azazel contained in these works. Certainly, they depict an aberration of the biblical concept of Azazel. How this aberration developed is a subject for a separate study. It should, however, be noted that it is a product of a mainly urban Jewish society that lost its link with the desert and tradition of a God that dwells in the desert.

3. PROPOSING A SOLUTION

3.1 PURPOSE OF THE RITUAL

The purpose of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16 is seemingly to carry the confessed sins of the Israelites into the desert to Azazel. Maimonides explains, “The goat [of the Day of Atonement] that was sent [into the wilderness] (Lev 16:20, seq.) served as an atonement for all serious transgressions more than any other sin-offering of the congregation. As it thus seemed to carry off all sins, it was not accepted as an ordinary sacrifice to be slaughtered, burnt, or even brought near the Sanctuary; it was removed as far as possible, and sent forth into a waste, uncultivated, uninhabited land. There is no

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68 Helm, R. “Azazel in Early Jewish Tradition.” Andrews University Seminary Studies 32,3 (1994) 217–226 (221). Helm finds support in a being a “male goat” or “demon,” and the possibility of understanding “on behalf of Azazel.”

69 On the problems of the early Jewish tradition regarding, see Hanson (220–33) and Grabbe (153–55).
doubt that sins cannot be carried like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being to be laid on that of another being. But these ceremonies are of a symbolic character, and serve to impress men with a certain idea, and to induce them to repent; as if to say, we have freed ourselves of our previous deeds, have cast them behind our backs, and removed them from us as far as possible."

Cheyne agrees with Maimonides that the purpose of the scapegoat ritual was to provide the primitive folk with a visible act of removal of the sins and of the consequences of those sins (cf. Lev 14:53). However, he also believes that the second purpose was to do away with the cult of the שעריך. However, one wonders how giving such a prominent role to a demonic Azazel in a major festival would undermine the cult of the שעריך.

Leviticus 16 details the solemn ceremonies and underscores the spiritual significance of the Day of Atonement. It naturally follows a section of Leviticus that deals with various impurities (of animals, human body, human clothing, and human dwelling) and their purification (Leviticus 11–15). Leviticus 16 concludes with the purification on the Day of Atonement of the sanctuary and the purification of the people from the spiritual impurities of their sins. The two he-goats were a sin-offering (Lev 16:5) for these two purposes.

Goats were selected for their symbolic value. The goats of the land of Israel (Capra hircus mambrica), usually black and long haired, perhaps adequately symbolized long term or persistent sinning. The jumpy behavior of the goat reminded the sinner’s deviations from the norm, and their eating habits (cf. the later expression, ניאוֹל: בקָצִית בְּטִימָת) the destructiveness of sin. The שעריר תני also conveniently alluded to ניאוֹל. On the Day of Atonement the Israelite wanted to be cleansed of his transgressions and wanted his Temple cleansed of any infractions made by its users. He wanted a clean slate and a new beginning. With so much at stake and God’s abode on earth uncertain, he could not gamble. Two he-goats were thus used one for each of God’s possible abodes on earth. The two he-goats were one sin-offering, but split for two different destinations. This would explain the meticulous insistence on the two he-goats being alike in every possible way.

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71 Cheyne, 154.
72 The term קרב “offering, oblation” is derived from the root קרב “near,” drawing on the presentation ritual to deities. There appear to be essentially two types of animal קרב שֵׁלֶת and נַעַה קְרֵבָן. Thus, the scapegoat is a sacrifice,
insistence on the two he-goats being alike in every possible way and the selection by lot for the different functions.

3.2 TIME THE RITUAL WAS INTRODUCED

Cheyne thought it reasonable that the scapegoat ritual was one of the latest additions to the Priestly Code, about the 4th century BCE, but he does not supply any support for this opinion. Modern critics who date Leviticus 16 late usually refer to Neh 9:1, which claims that a special fast and day of mourning was held on the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month. It is argued that if the tenth of the seventh month had been observed as the fast of the Day of Atonement there would have been no need for holding a special fast on the twenty-fourth day. Segal notes that “this argument is fallacious. The Day of Atonement is not only a fast but also a holy festival on which mourning in sackcloth with earth upon the head is strictly prohibited.”

Many felt that the ritual of the scapegoat is of ancient origins. Loehr observed: “Asasel, the Holy Tabernacle, above all the ‘camp’ of Israel, are signs seeming to point back to the period before the settling in Canaan, to an existence in the shepherd steppes of southernmost Palestine. Perhaps the sending of a goat to Asasel is a pre-Mosaic ritual of atonement of one of the Leah tribes, which for some unknown reasons was adopted into the cult of Yahweh when Yahwism arose.” Driver says, “No doubt the ritual is a survival from another stage of popular belief, engrafted on and accommodated to the sacrificial system of the Hebrews...” He draws attention to the primitive character of the ritual, which has many analogies in the Old Testament itself (Lev 14:4, 49) and in other countries.

Bergmann considers the phrase “before the Lord” a clumsy attempt to demonstrate that the goat destined for the demon was still under God’s jurisdiction. He surmises “that the custom must have been a very old one going back to the time when YHWH did not yet have full dominion over the

albeit it is not slaughtered but sent away. Its function is the same as that of the slaughtered before YHWH. Certainly, Leviticus attests to few קרבנות שלם (Lev 14:2–9, 53).

73 Cheyne, 155.
74 Segal, 248, note 32.
Hebrews. ... Much later, during the Second Temple, the custom was incorporated into the rites of the Day of Atonement (m. Yoma) once more.\textsuperscript{77}

In Zatelli’s view “The material in Lev. xvi is pre-exilic. In this chapter, however, a strong distinction must be made between the textual and literary traditions with different levels, and the religious operative tradition that may have survived even from very remote times, obviously undergoing transformations and adaptations of various types.”\textsuperscript{78}

Determining whether the scapegoat ritual was pre-exilic or post exilic does not appear trivial. Most of the opinions expressed do not rest on solid foundations. The ritual of the scapegoat is presented in Leviticus 16 as if its purpose and לְאָזָאֵל/אֲזָאֵל are well known. This would seem to imply a tradition that was venerated for some time. Yet, except for Leviticus 16 לְאָזָאֵל does not occur. Baffling is also the seeming predominance of לְאָזָאֵל in later sources. Perhaps, לְאָזָאֵל, which originally depicted God in the deity’s desert abode, was intentionally suppressed, but continued to exist in the oral tradition.

3.3 \textit{God in the Desert}

It has been indicated that the basic thesis of this paper is that on the Day of Atonement the goat to YHWH was presented at YHWH’s abode—the Temple and Azazel’s (לְאָזָאֵל) goat was presented to Azazel at the abode of the latter—the desert. The distinction is in the abodes and ritual, not the deities. The ritual of the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement was a compromise, attempting to satisfy those who believed that God dwells in the desert when on earth and those who believed that He dwells in the Holy Tabernacle. It was not a compromise between two deities. Indeed, the Gaon (c. 997–1023 CE) R. Shmuel Ben Hofni says, “Although it is (only) with reference to the goat of the sin-offering that it is written (explicitly) that it was for the Lord, the scapegoat was also for the Lord” (apud Ibn Ezra on Lev 16:8, cf. R. Behai Ben Asher of Barcelona on Lev 16:7).

Loretz argued that the passages Lev 16:8, 10, and 26 do not point to an original desert abode of Azazel. In Leviticus 16 Azazel is “eine Potenz neben Jahwe und gleich diesem ohne Ortsbestimmung.”\textsuperscript{79} While the text


\textsuperscript{78} Zatelli, 262.

does not specifically say that God’s abode was in the desert and Lorentz’s contention is theologically appealing, the context of the scapegoat ritual provides a strong basis for the argument that the scapegoat was sent where Azazel would get it. Furthermore, the ritual cannot be viewed in isolation from the Israelites’ history of encounter with God in the desert.

Segal surmises that during their sojourn in Egypt, until they became enslaved, the Israelites must have continued their ancestral practice of sacrificing animals and could do so only in the wilderness near Goshen. Indeed, the nation’s record of direct experience with God’s presence in the desert is unique and unmatched by the deity’s presence in the Temple in Jerusalem. God’s self-revelation to Moses on the “mountain of God” is crafted in terms of speaking from a burning bush (Ex 3:1–5). This very mountain in the desert would be a place of worship (Ex 3:12). The request to be presented to Pharaoh: “The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God” (Ex 3:18) is not considered a ridiculous ruse. When the request is actually made (Ex 5:1–3), Pharaoh has only problems with the identity of the God of the Hebrews and the latter’s stature but not of the deity’s being in the desert, and finally acquiesces to this seemingly strange request (Ex 8:23–24, cf. Ex 10:7–12, 24–26).

There might have been an early tradition that God’s abode on earth is in the wilderness of the deserts. Inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud contain the expressions *brikk lYHWH tmn w’ššrth* (“blessing to the Lord of Teman and to its Asherah”) and *lYHWH ššmrn w’ššrth* (“to the Lord of Samaria and its Asherah”).81 The occurrence of the tetragrammaton in these inscriptions raised the possibility that YHWH was at some time worshipped in that region. Emerton analyzed the available evidence and reached the conclusion that this is unlikely.82 However, Cross considers Teman to be a pre-Israelite sanctuary of YHWH in the southern mountains Sinai-Teman-Se’ir.83 Similarly Weinfeld feels that YHWH was particularly esteemed in this area since YHWH also appears from Teman in all the different types of inscriptions

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from ‘Ajrud.84 This would agree with the Song of Deborah: O Lord, when You came forth from Seir, advanced from the country of Edom, the earth trembled; The heavens dripped, Yea, the clouds dripped water, The mountains quaked—Before the Lord, him of Sinai, Before the Lord, God of Israel (Jud 5:4–5).

A few years ago, Dan reopened the possibility that contrary to the accepted view, which links רכב ענברות (Ps 68:5) with a similar phrase in Ugaritic meaning “rider on clouds,” רכב ענברות means “rider in the steppes.”85 Dan shows that the meaning “deserts” for ענברות enriches the text ideationally and in a literary sense. If correct, this would provide another aspect of God’s association with the desert and its place in the national memory. Dan says, “The historical memory of the Exodus and wandering in the desert is anchored in the Bible in the tradition of appearance from the south.”86

The desert is usually considered in negative terms in the Bible (Deut 20:5, 8:15, Jer 2:2, 6, 31, Ps 107:4–5, Job 30:3). Yet, the Bible also construes positive memories of the desert that are linked to the Israelites’ encounter with God that dwells in Sinai. Amir says, “[i]ndeed, this tradition about the main residence of the God of Israel on Mount Sinai continued to live for many generations after they reached the Promised Land.”87 God was very close and visible to the Israelites in the desert for forty years. The pillars of cloud and fire were a constant presence (Ex 13:21–22, 14:19–20). Miraculous things happened at times of distress (Ex 15:22–25, 16:4–5, 11–12, etc.). God’s self-revelation occurred on Mount Sinai and there God spoke to them. YHWH’s presence was visible when God descended onto the sanctuary in the Tabernacle, a place he chose to dwell in (Ex 25:8). No wonder that in the theophanies, God usually appears from the abode in the desert marching to war. It is there that God visibly manifested the deity’s “strength and fierceness” (לַוחז), and it is from there that the prophets saw YHWH come in time of distress in the theophanies (Deut. 33:2, Jud 5:4–5, Mic. 1:4, Hab 3:3, Ps 68:5, 8–10).88

85 Dan, D. יָמִים מְהוֹדֵשׁ לֵבְכֵם עֵנֶבֶרֶה (עָנָבֶרֶה), Beit Mikra 184 (2005) 43–62.
86 Dan, 49.
During the monarchical period the leadership was probably interested to promote a central and unifying place of worship, the Temple in Jerusalem, as God’s dwelling on earth (1Kgs 8:13). It was necessary for the sake of national unity to minimize the historical notion of YHWH’s dwelling in the desert, in an uncertain and hard to access location. The fact that in ancient Near-Eastern cultures the desert was a place of evil spirits might have played a role in this intent. The use of aziz in reference to a Phoenician deity, to whom the powerful effects of the sun are ascribed, and of bel-aziz “Bel the Strong,” might have made the retention of ונָחָל problematic. This could be the reason for such thorough eradication of ונָחָל from the biblical text. Yet, history could not be erased or rewritten. History clearly states that the Israelites found God in the desert. On the Day of Atonement, as in the magnificent theophanies, they addressed YHWH with their most urgent concerns in the desert.

4. CONCLUSION

Jewish tradition associates the outstanding manifestations or attributes of God with the deity’s various names. Thus with הוהי is associated “mercy,” with שֵׁלֹחַ “justice,” with שֵׁלוֹם “peace,” etc. It has been shown that significant evidence suggests that biblical ונָחָל was originally the homophone ונָחָל “Powerful God,” whose abode on earth was in the desert. Perhaps, ונָחָל was associated with the deity’s attribute of strength, explaining the coming of the deity from the desert in the theophanies.

The ritual described in Lev 16:5–26 was to the same God, potentially being at two locations—the Temple or the desert, and identified as הוהי and ונָחָל respectively. This would explain the meticulous rite of ensuring sameness of sacrifice and leaving the final pick of the scapegoat to God via the procedure of a lot. On the unique Day of Atonement God (as הוהי and ונָחָל) was approached at both locations, there could not be even the slightest show of preference.

In later times, God’s abode in the Temple or Jerusalem completely displaced God’s desert abode, relegating it to evil forces as was the belief in Near-Eastern cultures. In this process ונָחָל, or a derivative of this name, became a satanic figure.

(1994) 154. See also Ibn Ezra on Deut 33:2 and Hab 3:3.