

What About ... The Atonement and the Passover?

BY DR. DAVID A. DEWITT

Or ... Why Did Jesus Die on the Passover Instead of on the Day of Atonement?

I was asked this question, and I thought it was interesting, so I decided to look into it a bit. What I learned was quite amazing (to me). Jesus died on the Passover and was called our Passover, but Jesus never referred to Himself as, nor did the apostles ever call Jesus, our atonement. So the Passover is a “type” of Christ mentioned in the Bible. The atonement is not.

The Passover (Exodus 12) is a spring festival beginning on the 15th day of Nisan (March or April), the night of a full moon after the northern vernal equinox. The word “Passover” occurs 79 times in the Bible. It’s in both the Old and New Testaments, and it always refers to the Passover ceremony, except in 1 Corinthians 5:7, where it says, *For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.* The Passover procedure was *On the tenth of this [first] month they are each one to take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers’ households, a lamb for each household. It was to be an unblemished male a year old. They were to keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight. Moreover, they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts*

and on the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that same night, roasted with fire, and they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The result was [God said], *when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations.*

The Day of Atonement (Hebrew, *Yom Kippur* – Leviticus 16; 23:27-28; 25:9) occurs once a year on the tenth day of Tishri (October 8). Unlike the word “Passover,” the word *atonement* (including *atone*, *atoning*, and *atoned*) is used for various coverings of sin. It occurs 91 times, but it never occurs in the New Testament. On the Day of Atonement, the people were to have a Sabbath of complete rest and the high priest was to cleanse himself and the tabernacle, then sprinkle the blood of a bull and of a goat on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant. Then a second goat, a *scapegoat*, was released into the wilderness to *make atonement* for the sins of the nation. The word atonement [כִּפּוּר (*kip-pur*)] means to cover, and it was used in at least three different ways:

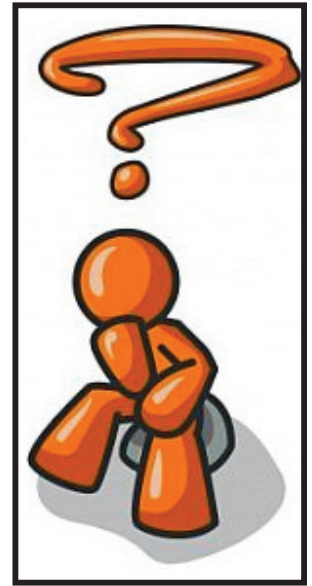
1. For balancing the scales of an injustice (2 Samuel 21:3)
2. For offsetting sin, with *lovingkindness and truth* (Proverbs 16:6)

3. For covering the sins of Israel for a year

The atonement is about Israelites dealing with (covering) their sins, **after** the Passover delivered them from Egypt. The atonement is like our dealing with our sin (1 Corinthians 15:34) or one another’s sin (1 Peter 4:8), **after** salvation (1 Corinthians 5:6-7). The Passover was not about dealing with sins. It was about being passed over for judgment (Exodus 12:12). The blood of the lamb allowed them to escape the wrath of God.

Why Does the New Testament Identify Jesus With the Passover, Not the Atonement?

1. **Both the Passover and the death of Christ** were accomplished by the blood of a lamb. Jesus was called the *Lamb of God* (John 1:29, 36). **But** Jesus was never called a scapegoat (or any kind of goat).
2. **Both the Passover and the death of Christ** were a *once for all* deliverance from bondage. **But** Hebrews 9:12-26 contrasts rather than compares Christ’s *once for all* death (9:12) with the Day of Atonement when *the high priest enters the holy place year by year* (9:25; Exodus 30:10). The Day of Atonement covered the sins of Israel, but it didn’t eliminate their sin because *it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins* (Hebrews 10:4).



3. **Both the Passover and the death of Christ** are remembered by a *memorial* of a one-time act that we should *celebrate*. **But** The Day of Atonement was not a memorial, it actually atoned for the sins of Israel, but only for a year.
4. **Both the Passover and the death of Christ** required people to do something. Both require people to apply the blood of the lamb by faith in the Word of God. **But** on the Day of Atonement, the people only had a Sabbath of complete rest.
5. **Both the Passover and the death of Christ** called for action on the part of each individual person. Each family killed their own lamb and everyone ate of it, just as salvation requires a personal individual decision. **But** on the Day of Atonement only the high priest offered the sacrifice, and it was for the nation of Israel. Since the church is not a nation and does not have clerical priests, it does not parallel the atonement.
6. **Both the Passover and the death of Christ** began a relationship with God. The Passover delivered them from Egypt into a new relationship with God. Receiving Christ's death as payment for our sin is salvation, delivering us from sin and beginning our new relationship with God. **But** the atonement covered sin after the Passover. It was about maintaining fellowship with God, not beginning a relationship with God.
7. **Neither the Passover nor the death of Christ** are about the believer doing some work to cover his sin. The Passover was not about sin, it was about deliverance by applying the blood of the lamb. The sins of the Israelites were not the issue at the Passover. The same is true with salvation. Indeed, Christ's death paid for sin, but that made salvation about faith in Christ, not trying to atone for our own sin. If you are trying to get right with God by dealing with your sin, you will never be saved. What sends an unbeliever to hell is his sin. But what keeps an unbeliever out of heaven has nothing to do with sin. He goes to hell because he is a sinner, he does not go to heaven because he has not received Christ.

Christ's death, as a substitution, propitiation, reconciliation and redemption, was a *once for all* action (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10; Romans 6:10; 1 Peter 3:18). Atonement was not. You can call Christ's death on the cross a "substitutionary atonement" if you like. But the Bible never does. Remember, animal sacrifices were also a substitutionary atonement, but they were not *once for all*, and they did not pay for sin.

Dying on the Passover, Jesus identified Himself as the One who paid for our sins, allowing God to *pass over* us for judgment (John 5:24; Romans 5:8-21; 1 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 1:18-19; 2:24; 3:18; Revelation 20:15). **The cross did not just cover our sin. It paid for it.** So it's better to say what the apostles said, *Christ is our Passover* (1 Corinthians 5:7) ... *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29, 36).