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ראש הטופס

תחתית הטופס

Is Azazel a Goat, Place, Demon, or Deity?

Azazel plays the role of a deity in the biblical ritual of Yom Kippur, and in early interpretation, he played a central role as the initiator of sin and even the devil, or alternatively, as a protective figure. Later tradition obscured his identity, presenting Azazel as the name of a demon, as the scapegoat itself, and even as a place name.

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A. Fietz/Pixabay (adapted)

Azazel in Leviticus

The annual Yom Kippur ritual for the purification of the temple and the community, described in Leviticus, includes the enigmatic offering of two goats:

ויקרא טז:ח וְנָתַן אַהֲרֹן עַל שְׁנֵי הַשְּׂעִירִם גּוֹרָלוֹת גּוֹרָל אֶחָד לַי־הוָה וְגוֹרָל אֶחָד לַעֲזָאזֵל׃

The goat that goes to YHWH is sacrificed in the holy precinct; the goat that goes to Azazel is sent into the wilderness, carrying away the faults of the people so that they can receive atonement (v. 10).[2] Later in the chapter, we are told that Aaron is to transfer the sins of the people onto the second goat:

ויקרא טז:כא וְסָמַךְ אַהֲרֹן אֶת שְׁתֵּי (ידו) [יָדָיו] עַל רֹאשׁ הַשָּׂעִיר הַחַי וְהִתְוַדָּה עָלָיו אֶת כָּל עֲו‍ֹנֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת כָּל פִּשְׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל חַטֹּאתָם וְנָתַן אֹתָם עַל רֹאשׁ הַשָּׂעִיר וְשִׁלַּח בְּיַד אִישׁ עִתִּי הַמִּדְבָּרָה. טז:כב וְנָשָׂא הַשָּׂעִיר עָלָיו אֶת כָּל עֲו‍ֹנֹתָם אֶל אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה וְשִׁלַּח אֶת הַשָּׂעִיר בַּמִּדְבָּר.

The goat carries the iniquities of Israel into the wilderness to Azazel. The person who sends the goat to Azazel must wash his clothes and his body before reentering the camp (v. 26).[3]

Who or what is Azazel?

The Meaning of the Name Azazel

*ʿAzaʾzel* (עזאזל) as spelled in the Masoretic text has no clear meaning in Hebrew. It is probably a correction of an original form *ʿAzaz +ʾel*(עזזאל), attested in some manuscripts of the Samaritan Pentateuch[4] and in the Temple Scroll’s (11QTS) rendition of the scapegoat ritual.[5] This spelling is also found in the so called “*Pesher* on the Periods” (4Q180), which will be discussed below.

The form *‘Azaz’el* (עזזאל) combines the Semitic root ע.ז.ז, meaning to be “enraged,” “fierce,” or “strong[6],” with ʾel, referring either to the proper name of the god El, or perhaps the generic term for a god in Hebrew. Azazel could mean something like “El/the god is fierce/strong” or perhaps “the rage of El/the god.” The biblical name עֲזַזְיָהוּAzazyahu/ Azaziah (1 Chr 15:21; 27:20; 2Chr 31:13) follows the same format, with the Yahwistic theophoric element, *yahu*, instead of El.

Alternatively, since a god named Azuz/Aziz (*ʿzz*) is attested in Mesopotamian and Levantine (especially Phoenician) sources, the name could mean “Azaz is god,” referring to an incarnation of this deity.[7]

Demon or Deity

The ritual of the two goats appears to present Azazel as a deity, since Azazel is parallel to YHWH in the ritual, with one goat going to each. Several clues in the passage suggest, however, that the god Azazel has been “demoted.”

The goat must first be presented to YHWH before being sent off to Azazel, indicating YHWH’s superior status:

ויקרא טז:ז וְלָקַח אֶת שְׁנֵי הַשְּׂעִירִם **וְהֶעֱמִיד אֹתָם לִפְנֵי יְ־הוָה** פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד.

Moreover, unlike YHWH, Azazel does not receive a sacrifice but is rather the target of an apotropaic ritual, performed to ward off impurity and effect atonement.[8] Finally, Azazel resides not in a temple, but in the desert (v. 10 *hammiddbarah*), a space which is often connected with chaos and death.[9]

Azazel may once have played a more powerful role in Israelite religion, but Leviticus 16 now treats him as a demonic entity who presides over the wilderness and chaotic spaces, where impurity belongs, and as the recipient of an elimination ritual.

Against this background, it seems likely that the change in spelling from *ʿAzazʾel* (עזזאל) to *ʿAzaʾzel* (עזאזל)—i.e., by moving the *aleph*—is a theological correction, intended to erase any theophoric element from it, or to distinguish its name from an angel’s name.

Avoiding Azazel’s Name (LXX)

Another possible theological correction is the understanding of Azazel in the 3rd century B.C.E. Greek Septuagint (LXX), which offers two different translations of Azazel.

In the first three instances of Azazel in the chapter, LXX translates using the Greek root *apopomp*- as if it means “the one who eliminates” or “the one who wards off evil.”[10] In Greek religion, the expression *hoi ampopompaîoi* denotes divine agents responsible for, or that receive apotropaic rituals. All this vocabulary belongs to the context of Greek purification and atonement rituals, some of which even involve the sending away of goats, exactly as it happens in the biblical ritual.[11]

The most straightforward way to understand thisterm according to the Greek syntax is to consider the word as a substantive participle which stands in parallel with “the Lord” (τῷκυρίῳ).[12] Nevertheless, the LXX avoids making Azazel a proper name, perhaps feeling that such an exact parallel to YHWH would be problematic.

In the final appearance of the name, however, the LXX uses a totally different root:

Lev 16:26 and the one who will send out the goat to be designated **for the release** (εἰςἄφεσιν) shall wash his clothes and clean his body with water, and after that he shall come to the camp.[13]

Here the translator has chosen a periphrastic expression that refers to the “release” or “sending away” (*aphesis*) of the goat. This translation may well correspond to an etymological reading of the name Azazel according to the Aramaic root *ʾazal*, “to leave.” Thus, in verse 26, any reference to Azazel as a kind of power has disappeared.

While it is unclear why the LXX changed roots here, it is possible that the belief in a being called Azazel was unknown to the Greek translator, and the meaning of the word was confusing. Thus, he responded in diverse and creative ways.

Azazel is the Goat: Philo’s Allegory

Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.E. – ca. 50 C.E.), a Jewish philosopher whose main source was the LXX translation of the Torah, discusses this ritual in his “Who Is the Heir?” He makes no mention of a being but seems to understand LXX’s renderings of Azazel as describing the sent away goat (*Her*. 179):[14]

A great impression is made upon me by the selection and division of the two goats which are brought as an offering for the purpose of atonement, and which are divided by an obscure and uncertain principle of division, namely, by lot. For of two principles, the one which is occupied about the affairs of divine virtue is consecrated and set apart to be offered to God; but that which devotes itself to the concerns of human unhappiness is appropriated **to the banished creature**(τῇφυγάδι), for the share which that has obtained the sacred scriptures **call the scapegoat**(ἀποπομπαῖον), since it is removed from its place, and pursued and driven away to a great distance from wisdom.[15] (Yonge trans., adjusted)

As Philo’s main approach was to interpret the Torah allegorically, here he suggests that the goat running away represents the soul that “runs away” from wisdom.

Azazel Is a Place: Talmud

Later Septuagint codices corrected the original Greek formulation by specifying that Azazel denotes “a rocky and fortified place” where the goat is sent off to. This reading goes back to the Septuagint revisers, such as Aquila, who worked in Palestine around the 2nd century C.E.[16]

Such a correction aligns with other rabbinic interpretations of Azazel, according to which Azazel is not the name of a demon but of the deserted place where the goat is sent (e.g., b. Yoma 67b).

תנו רבנן: עזאזל - שיהא עז וקשה... תניא אידך: עזאזל - קשה שבהרים...

In the quote, the first two interpretations assume that Azazel is not a being at all, but a description of the wilderness area where the goat is sent.

A Reminder of Angelic Sin: Talmud and Midrash

The same passage in the Babylonian Talmud continues with a third tradition:

תנא דבי רבי ישמעאל: עזאזל - שמכפר על מעשה עוזא ועזאל.

According to this, the ritual of sending the goat to Azazel is connected to a myth about the act of two wicked angels, Uzza and Azael. As Rashi (R. Solomon Yitzhaki, 1040–1105) explains in his commentary, the sin is connected to the story in Genesis 6:1–4 about divine beings (בני אלהים) taking human wives and producing demi-god children.[17]

While the text does not clarify whether Azazel is one of these angels or if it is a place named after some combination of the names of these two angels, a midrashic text called Midrash Avkir (early 2nd millennium C.E.)[18] has another version of the story—with a different and more famous first angel—and here it is clear that Azazel is Azael. In this version, after the two angels sin with human women, God warns them that their descendants will all be drowned in the flood.

שמחזאי חזר בתשובה ותלה עצמו בין השמים ראשו למטה ורגליו למעלה ועדיין הוא תלוי בתשובה בין ארץ לשמים. עזאל לא חזר בתשובה ועדיין הוא עומד בקלקולו להסית בני אדם לדבר עבירה במיני צבעונין של נשים... [19] והוא עזאזל שבתורה.

Here we see Azael/Azazel as a permanent fixture in the world, the wicked tempter of humanity. This interpretation, which made it into the rabbinic corpus very late, was the standard interpretation in Second Temple literature.[20]

Azazel Affects Sin and Is Banished to the Desert

Several Second Temple traditions elaborate on the demonic nature of Azazel. For example, 4Q180, פשר על הקיצים, “the Pesher on the Periods,” ties Azazel into the story in Genesis 6:1–4, of angels mixing with human women and giving birth to demigods,[21] and further accuses Azazel and these angels of introducing sin into the world:

7 פ֯שר על עזזאלׄ והמלאכים אש[ר באו אל בנות האדם] 8[וי]לׄדׄו להם גברים ועל עזזאלׄ [ אשר למד לעשות חמס] 9[לאהוב ]עולה וׄלהנחיל רשעה...[22]

Azazel[23] is specifically responsible for teaching people metallurgy, jewelry, and make-up, leading to the world’s corruption through sex and violence:

1 Enoch 8:1 And Azazel taught men to make swords, and daggers, and shields and breastplates. And he showed them the things after these, and the art of making them: bracelets, and ornaments, and the art of making up the eyes and of beautifying the eyelids, and the most precious and choice stones, and all kinds of coloured dyes. And the world was changed. 8:2 And there was great impiety and much fornication, and they went astray, and all their ways became corrupt.[24]

The good angels then complain to God of the behavior of their wicked comrades, including a specific mention of Azazel:

9:6 See then what Azazel has done, how he has taught all iniquity on the earth and revealed the eternal secrets which were made in heaven.[25]

In God’s instructions for dealing with the angel rebellion, God has Raphael dispose of Azazel in such a way as to provide the needed back story for the ritual in Leviticus 16 and Azazel’s presence in the desert:

1 Enoch 10:4 And further the LORD said to Raphael: “Bind Azazel by his hands and his feet, and throw him into the darkness. And split open the desert which is in Dudael, and throw him there. 10:5 And throw on him jagged and sharp stones, and cover him with darkness; and let him stay there forever, and cover his face, that he may not see light, 10:6 and that on the great day of judgment he may be hurled into the fire…. 10:8 And the whole earth has been ruined by the teaching of the works of Azazel, and against him write down all sin.”[26]

The punishment recalls several features of the ritual involving Azazel in Leviticus, such as his association with the desert, the transfer of the sins of the people onto him (which in some versions of Enoch are literally “written” upon him), and the presence of rugged elements which are supposed to be in the region.[27]

Azazel Tempts Abraham

The Apocalypse of Abraham, dating to the first or second century C.E., retells the Covenant Between the Parts (Gen 15:7–21), with Azazel as the bird of prey that tries to consume the animals or parts of animals that Abram had cut up in the covenant ritual (v. 17). The bird first addresses Abram, trying to convince him to leave:

Apoc. Abr. 13:4 And the impure bird spoke to me and said, “What are you doing Abraham, on the holy heights, where no one eats or drinks, nor is there upon them food of men. But these will all be consumed by fire and they will burn you up. 13:5 Leave the man who is with you and flee! Since if you ascend to the height, they will destroy you.”

Abraham is not fooled by this message, and turns to the angel[28] who is with him to explain, and learns that the bird is none other than Azazel himself:

Apoc. Abr. 13:6 And it came to pass when I saw the bird speaking I said to the angel, “What is this, my lord?” And he said, “This is iniquity, this is Azazel!”

The angel then reproaches Azazel with a lengthy rebuke,[29] and teaches Abraham what to say to Azazel to neutralize his effect:

Apoc. Abr. 14:5 Say to him, “May you be the fire brand of the furnace of the earth! Go, Azazel, into the untrodden parts of the earth….”[30]

Abraham says the required formula, and Azazel loses his power to affect him.

Azazel Is Promoted to Devil

Azazel is mentioned once more in the Apocalypse of Abraham, in the description of the end of days, where he functions something like the devil, analogizing the “fires of hell” (31:3) to the fire of Azazel’s tongue:

Apoc. Abr. 31:5 And those who followed after the idols and after their murders will rot in the womb of the Evil One—the belly of Azazel, and they will be burned by the fire of Azazel’s tongue.

According to this, Azazel is not merely an evil angel, but the ultimate source of evil, the devil himself who burns up sinners in the afterworld with his fiery tongue.

An Anti-Demon

The Testament of Solomon, a 3rd century C.E. Christian work based on an older Jewish core (probably 1st cent. C.E.), sees Azazel as a positive figure who can protect one from harm. The work is written as if from Solomon, in which describes his encounters with various demons over whom he has power, thanks to a magic ring given to him by the angel Michael.

In one story, he summons a snakelike demon named LixTetrax and questions him:

Test. Sol. 7:5 “What is your activity?” I queried. He responded, “I create divisions among men, I make whirlwinds, start fires, I set fields on fire, and I make households nonfunctional. Usually, I carry on my activity in the summertime. If I get the chance, I slither in under the corners of houses during night or day. I am the direct offspring of the Great One."…[31]

The demon further informs Solomon that he is in charge of the one-and-a-half day fever (v. 6), after which Solomon asks:

7 … Finally I asked him: “By what name are you thwarted?” He said: “By the name of the archangel Azael.”

Solomon then puts his seal on the angel and forces him to help build the Temple. But we learn from this demon that Azael is an archangel, and his name has the power to stop the demon from giving people fevers.[32] Aza(z)el’s apotropaic function here may relate to his function in Leviticus 16 as the being who absorbs Israel’s sins. This interpretation, which is attested only by Christian sources, bears some affinity with the function of Christ as absorbing sins: it might well be derived from a Christian reading of the scapegoat ritual in Leviticus 16.

A Magical Name

The name Azazel was used in Greek Hellenistic and late antique magic traditions, in which the Jewish component played a considerable role. The name is attested, with various spellings, on incantation bowls, amulets, papyri and magical objects, until late antiquity.[33] Interestingly, a Greek Christian amulet still bears the name of Azael accompanied by his etymology: “Azael: the force of God.”[34]

It is possible that one element in the attractiveness of the name was its variability. Once the figures of Asael and Azazel were identified with each other, and the myth of the Watchers was translated in Aramean, Greek, and Coptic, the number of spellings for Asael/Azazel considerably increased.[35] Such variability made Azazel a perfect *nomenmagicum*, as magical names and formulae are often characterized by inner variation and phonetic play.

A Versatile Being

While later Jewish interpretation attempts to erase Azazel as a being, suggesting that it could be the name of a land or even as a reference to the scapegoat itself, he was a key figure in Second Temple period thinking. In Jewish interpretation, he is the instigator of sin which leads to the flood, and he continues to try to trip up the righteous, including Abraham himself. In some texts, he even begins to resemble what we would call the devil. While all this apparently derives from his place as a desert being to whom sins are to be sent, some Christian texts understood his role in the opposite way, seeing him as an apotropaic figure who could protect them harm.

1. Translations are from NRSV with slight modifications.

ויקרא טז:י וְהַשָּׂעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו הַגּוֹרָל לַעֲזָאזֵל יָעֳמַד־חַי לִפְנֵי יְ־הוָה לְכַפֵּר עָלָיו לְשַׁלַּח אֹתוֹ לַעֲזָאזֵל הַמִּדְבָּרָה׃

ויקרא טז:כו וְהַמְשַׁלֵּחַ אֶת־הַשָּׂעִיר לַעֲזָאזֵל יְכַבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְרָחַץ אֶת־בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמָּיִם וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יָבוֹא אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה׃

1. Stefan Schorch, *The Samaritan Pentateuch: Leviticus: A Critical EditioMaior* (Berlin: de Gruyter 2018), 137.

כו:11 ...והתודה על רואשו את כול עוונות בני ישראל עם כו:12 כול אשמתמה לכול חטאתמה ונתנמה על רואש השעיר ושלחו כו:13 **לעזזאל** המדבר ביד איש אתי ונשא השעיר את כול עוונות...

This is the end of column 26, and the beginning of the next column (27) is missing. Azazel was apparently also mentioned earlier in column 26, in ln 4, which describes the lot to be placed on each goat. But as the scroll is damaged there, and the word needs to be reconstructed, the spelling can only be deduced from the word’s appearance in ln 13.

1. Bernd Janowski and Gernot Wilhelm, “Der Bock, der die Sündenhinausträgt. ZurReligionsgeschichte des Azazel-Ritus Lev 16,10.21,” in *ReligionsgeschichtlicheBeziehungenzwischenKleinasien, Nordsyrien und demAlten Testament*, ed. Bernd Janowski, Klaus Koch, and Gernot Wilhelm (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag ; Göttingen : Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 1993), 109–169.
2. Editor’s note: For a discussion of this ritual in its ancient Near Eastern context, see Noga Ayali-Darshan, [“The Scapegoat Ritual and Its Ancient Near Eastern Parallels,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-scapegoat-ritual-and-its-ancient-near-eastern-parallels) *TheTorah* (2020).
3. See also v. 22, where the destination of the scapegoat is said to be an *eretzgezerah*, a “cut off land.”
4. Hesychius, *Lexicon* A 6552; Harpocration, *Lexicon* Alpha 199; Lysias, *Against Andocides* 6.53; Callimachus, *Aetia* fr. 75.12–14 (Pfeiffer).
5. John Wevers, *Leviticus, Septuaginta: VetusTestamentumGraecum 2/2* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 1986), *ad loc*.
6. Editor’s note: For more on this story, see Benjamin Sommer, [“Why Are There Demigods in a Monotheistic Torah?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/why-are-there-demigods-in-a-monotheistic-torah) *TheTorah* (2015).
7. The text is lost, though copies of it apparently existed into the 17th century. We know the text from quotes. In this case, the story was preserved in the *Yalkut Shimoni* on Genesis 6, and from there, it appears both in Adolph Jellenick’s *Beit Midrasch* (vol. 4, p. 127) and Judah D. Eisenstein’s *Otzar HaMidrashim* (s.v. שמחזאי ועזאל א, p. 550).
8. Here the text explains the Azazel ritual:

ולכך היו ישראל מקריבין קרבנות ביוה"כ איל אחד לה' שיכפר על בני ישראל ואיל אחד לעזאזל שיסבול עונותיהם של ישראל...

Notably, the text here refers to rams while the biblical text refers to goats.

1. The reemergence of Second Temple traditions here fits with a pattern we see in several late midrashic collections such as *Pirkei de-rabbi Eliezer* and *Midrash Tadsche*. See discussion in, Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill 2009). For a discussion of this story’s reemergence in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, see *eadem*, [“Reintroducing the Myth of the Fallen Angels into Judaism,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/reintroducing-the-myth-of-the-fallen-angels-into-judaism) *TheTorah* (2015). For a brief discussion of this text in the context of Second Temple myths, see Samuel Glaser, [“Demigods and the Birth of Noah,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/demigods-and-the-birth-of-noah) *TheTorah* (2020).
2. The connection between these angels and the introduction of sin is based on the fact that in Genesis, this story appears immediately before the description of humanity’s violence and corruption in the opening of the Noah story. This theme was the basis of long expansions of the angels’ part in humanity’s fall, known as “the myth of Watchers.” For more on the watchers, see Miryam Brand, [“The Benei-Elohim, the Watchers, and the Origins of Evil,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-benei-elohim-the-watchers-and-the-origins-of-evil) *TheTorah* (2016).
3. The reading and reconstruction follow, Elisha Qimron, *מגילות מדבר יהודה: החיבורים העבריים* [*The Dead Sea Scrolls: The Hebrew Writings*], בין מקרא למשנה [Between Bible and Mishnah](Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2013), 2.296. While other reconstructions differ, the gist remains the same.
4. the
5. Translation from *Outside the Bible*, 2.1370.
6. *Outside the Bible*, 2.1371
7. *Outside the Bible*, 2.1372.
8. Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur*, 85–95.
9. In this retelling, it isn’t YHWH but an angel speaking with Abraham.
10. Wolfgang Fauth, “Auf den Spuren des biblischen Azazel (Lev 16). Einige Residuen der Gestalt oder des Namens in jüdisch-aramäischen, griechischen, koptischen, äthiopischen, syrischen und mandäischenTexten,” *ZAW* 110 (1998): 514–534.
11. Karl Preisendanz, *Papyri GraecaeMagicae* *II* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1931), P 14, 3 (Christliches). Notably, here, in the Testament of Solomon, and in the Sibylline Oracles (in some MSS), Azazel is positive, and all three are Christian sources.
12. If we compare just transcriptions of the name in the Qumranic, Coptic and Greek versions of the book of Enoch, we find at least five: ‘*aza’zel*, *asael*, *aśael*, *azael*, *azalzel*. 4Q201 3 9; 4Q203 7 1 6; 4Q204 2 26; 1En 6:7.