

THE MERCY SEAT

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Introduction

“And Jehovah spake unto Moses” is a phrase repeated often in the books of Law within our English Old Testaments. This phrase demands the complete attention of the reader; God is speaking. It is with this phrase in Exodus 25 God delivers to Moses His requirements for the construction of the Tabernacle, its furnishings, and later its usage. The furnishing occupying the Tabernacle of greatest importance would be the Ark of the Covenant. The construction requirements of the Ark are recorded for the reader:

And thou shalt make a mercy-seat of pure gold: two cubits and a half *shall be* the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof. And thou shalt make two cherubim of gold; of beaten work shalt thou make them, at the two ends of the mercy-seat. And make one cherub at the one end, and one cherub at the other end: of one piece with the mercy-seat shall ye make the cherubim on the two ends thereof. And the cherubim shall spread out their wings on high, covering the mercy-seat with their wings, with their faces one to another; toward the mercy-seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. And thou shalt put the mercy-seat above upon the ark; and in the ark thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee. And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy-seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel. (Exo. 25:17-22 ASV).

It was from above this glorious seat that God would commune with His covenant people; the Nation of Israel. The Mercy Seat in the physical sense would be considered beautiful in its appearance and construction. It is not until one begins to explore the depths of its relationship to atonement and its typological comparison to Jesus that its true spiritual beauty and magnificence is truly unearthed. It is the purpose of this writing to briefly define what constitutes a type, give the reader a thorough description of the Mercy Seat’s construction, function, its seeming likeness

in description to Christ, and finally present it as a type and shadow of the atoning work of the Messiah.

Types and Shadows

When reading through the pages of the Sacred Text, a student of God's Word realizes very quickly there are repeated ideas, events, people, thoughts and phrases in almost every chapter in the Bible. These are not to be just read over quickly without much thought; they are there for a reason. Often times these related people and events are not there by coincidence, they are what is commonly referred to as a type or a shadow. Types and shadows are intentional by inspiration through the authors of Scripture. A type will often be presented with a phrase along the lines of "in like manner", "as", or some other term of comparison. An example is found in John 3:14 which states, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up". The Brazen Serpent was a type of Christ.

Ancient Christians understood the relationship between such comparisons and they welcomed them. They understood, as hopefully, today's students of God Word do as well, there are spiritual symbols in Old Testament text that foreshadow things having to do with the Christ. Paul wrote concerning practices of the Old Law, that they were "...a shadow of the things to come; but the body is Christ's" (Col. 2:17).

It is hard to come up with a hard and fast rule concerning what should and what should not be considered a type. This has caused some to reject identifying types in Scripture at all. This like many extremes in interpretation and exegesis are to be avoided. One must develop a healthy thirst for identifying God provided types and shadows and be cautious to not force comparisons the text does not make. Gerhard Hasel in his book *New Testament Theology* well writes:

Some scholars reject the typological approach completely.
However, the importance of the typological approach is not to be

denied, if it is not developed into a hermeneutic method which is applied to all texts like a divining-rod. Typological correspondence must be rigidly controlled on the basis on the direct relationship between various OT elements and their NT counterparts in order that arbitrary and fortuitous personal views may not creep into exegesis. One should be cautious enough not to be trapped into applying typology as the single definite theological ground plan whereby the unity of the Testaments is established (Hasel 191).

One needs to exercise a great deal of caution when identifying a comparison as a type or a shadow. There are many intentional comparisons in scripture given by inspiration in the form of a type/antitype relationship, however, there have been those in the past that have forced types out of a text or made a comparison the Scriptures do not make. A great example of this sort of extreme false typological interpretation can be found in the Epistle of Barnabas where the writer sees the 318 men circumcised from Abraham's house as a type of the crucified Christ.

For the scripture saith; And Abraham circumcised of his household eighteen males and three hundred. What then was the knowledge given unto him? Understand ye that He saith the eighteen first, and then after an interval three hundred. In the eighteen 'T' stands for ten, 'H' for eight. Here thou hast JESUS (IHSOYS). And because the cross in the 'T' was to have grace, He saith also three hundred. So He revealeth Jesus in the two letters, and in the remaining one the cross (Epistle of Barnabas IX. 7-9).

This is a great example of what can happen when typological interpretation is taken to its extreme without being checked by specific statements of correspondence in Scripture.

Although a clearly defined exegetical rule regarding types cannot be established, this author will present the following Old Testament item as a type and shadow of Christ with the hope that any comparison made between the Mercy Seat and Jesus are respectful, proper, and do not do the inspired text any theological or hermeneutical injustice.

The Mercy Seat

Description

The Mercy Seat in its most basic sense served as a lid or a cover for the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was a sacred, portable container or chest which along with its two related items, the Mercy Seat, and the Cherubim, was the most sacred of all objects to the Israelites during their period in the wilderness. It is known as the ark of the Lord (Jos. 6:11), the ark of God (1 Sam. 3:3), and the ark of the Testimony (Exo. 25:22). The Ark was also the only furnishing in the innermost room in Moses' Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple (Youngblood 113).

Upon the top of the sacred Ark of the Covenant sat the Mercy Seat. The Mercy Seat measured two and a half cubits by one and a half cubits (Exo. 25:17), which would be equivalent to 45 inches by 27 inches. On each end of the Seat sat Cherubim statues made of pure gold. Cherubs are angelic creatures usually associated with guarding a place or God. These two Cherub statues sat on opposite ends of the Mercy Seat with their wings outstretched over it and covering it as if they were protecting the throne of God. The first time Cherubim are mentioned in Scripture is in Genesis 3:24 where one is said to be guarding the entrance to the tree of life with a flaming sword (Elwell 883).

Function

The Mercy Seat had two primary functions. Its first function was of a resting place for Jehovah's presence when He gave instructions and teaching to Moses within the tent of meeting (Exo. 25:22, 30:6, Num. 7:89). The Ark of the Covenant with the Mercy Seat was considered to be the throne of God on Earth (Psa. 99:1,5; 132:7).

The second primary function of the Mercy Seat was related to the Day of Atonement (will be discussed later in manuscript). According to Leviticus 16, on that day the Holy of Holies was filled with a cloud of incense. The High Priest would then slaughter a bull and carry some of

its blood into the Holy of Holies and sprinkle it upon the Mercy Seat. With his finger he would sprinkle blood on the east side of the Mercy Seat and in front of it, in order to atone for his own sins and those of his household. Next the High Priest would slaughter a goat and sprinkle some of its blood on and before the Mercy Seat to atone for the sins of all the people and any form of uncleanness that may have defiled the sanctuary (Ellis 586).

Likeness to Christ

Although not part of the typological relationship between Jesus and the Mercy Seat, there are, however, many similarities in description and function between the two that can serve for illustrative purposes. Any resemblance and comparison between Christ and the Mercy Seat not clearly identified in the inspired text should be viewed only as a similarity and not have a typological interpretation forced upon it. Some of the similarities that can be drawn between Jesus and the Mercy Seat are as follows:

Likeness in Pure Nature

As was mentioned previously, the Mercy Seat was made of pure gold. Exodus 25:11 states, “And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, within and without shalt thou overlay it, and shalt make upon it a crown of gold round about”. When the nature and character of Jesus is observed, one discovers very quickly the purity He manifested. Scriptures make it quite clear that Jesus was pure both in action and character because He never sinned (Heb. 4:15, 1 Pet. 2:22). Gold is considered the most precious of all metals and what is more precious than the gift of Jesus the Christ?

Likeness in Revelation

Almighty Jehovah, from atop the Mercy Seat, would deliver His mind and His will unto Moses. God tells Moses that upon the Mercy Seat He “would meet with thee, and I will

commune with thee from above the mercy-seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel” (Exo. 25:11). Today, under the New Covenant, God reveals His mind and will to mankind through Jesus. This is what the Hebrew writer declares in the first chapter of Hebrews:

God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, at the end of these days spoken unto us in *his* Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds; who being the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had made purification of sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:1ff).

Likeness in Contact With the Law

The Mercy Seat sat on top of the Ark of Covenant which within its casings contained the tablets of the Law. Jesus too, had a close relationship with the Law. Jesus kept the Law perfectly and ultimately brought it to its final fulfillment so that mankind was no longer under the Law of Moses, but Christ. Jesus states His design was to fulfill the Law when He says, “Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfill” (Mat. 5:17).

Likeness in Angelic Interests

The Mercy Seat had two Cherub statues on each side. These angelic beings overshadowed the Mercy Seat in glory (Heb. 9:5). Through these Cherubs, in a way, angels had an interest in the Mercy Seat. Christ too, is a subject of angelic interest, especially as it relates to His redemptive work. Scripture records that angels announced His birth (Luke 2:8-14), are at His command (Mat. 26:53), rolled away the stone from in front of His tomb (Mat. 28:2), announced His second coming (Acts 1:10f), bear righteous souls to Paradise (Luke 16:19-31), and will be with Jesus at the parousia (2 Thess. 1:6-9).

Likeness in Communion with God and Prayer

It was upon the Mercy Seat that God communed with Moses for Israel and it was at the Mercy Seat that prayers and offerings were presented to God. The Christian today enjoys spiritual communion with God and communication by prayer through the mediation of Jesus Christ. “For there is one God, one mediator also between God and men, *himself* man, Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

The Mercy Seat as a Type of the Atoning Work of Christ

Many similarities between Jesus and the Mercy Seat can be drawn. The previous paragraphs attest to this fact. Although many similarities are observed, the clearest and seemingly most typological is the relationship in atoning work between Jesus and the Mercy Seat. The rest of this writing will carefully examine and compare these atoning acts.

The Hebrew writer declares in Hebrews 9:22, “...apart from shedding of blood there is no remission”. It is noted that this passage implies four things. First, there is a human condition known as “sin”. Second, that condition requires “forgiveness”. Third, there is a divine plan by which that forgiveness is obtained. Fourth, in some way that plan involves the shedding of blood (Jackson).

From the first sin in the garden until now, mankind has been plagued with the disease of sin. The Bible records from Genesis to Revelation God’s plan to redeem man. This eternal scheme of redemption has always required the shedding of blood. An example of the shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sins is observed in the activities surrounding the atoning sacrifices made in the tabernacle. This action of atonement is the topic under discussion in Hebrews 9.

And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called the Holy of holies; having a golden altar of incense, and the ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein *was* a golden pot holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; and above it cherubim of glory overshadowing the

mercy-seat; of which things we cannot now speak severally (Heb. 9:3-5).

The relationship between Jesus and the Mercy Seat begins to unfold for the reader in this passage. In the Greek New Testament, the word in this passage for Mercy Seat is *hilasterion*. This word is quite common in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, but is only used twice in the New Testament. Its most basic definition is “to propitiate or expiate” (Kittel 322-3). These terms carry the idea of the removal of sin. It is in this definition that the typological relationship between Jesus and the Mercy Seat begins to be disclosed.

The two places in the New Testament where this term is used is Hebrews 9:5 as has already been observed, and Romans 3:25 which states concerning Jesus, “whom God set forth *to be* a propitiation, through faith, in his blood, to show his righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God”. What is Paul declaring in this passage? He is declaring that God freely and openly offered Jesus as an atoning sacrifice to Himself so that all could observe this propitiatory act. God’s justice demanded an appeasement sacrifice, no sacrifice on this earth was worthy to appease God’s wrath; ultimately God Himself became the sacrifice (in the form of Jesus) offered back to Himself as a propitiation. A *hilasterion* (propitiation) in both its Old Testament usage and in the New Testament is an expiatory sacrifice. This is something which satisfies God’s justice. In the same way that the Mercy Seat served as the means for the atonement of the Israelites by the High Priest’s administration of blood upon it, Jesus’ bloodshed atones as well. Jesus’ atoning blood, however, does not require repeat administration upon an alter each year to satisfy the demands of God’s justice.

In last part of Romans 3:25, Paul writes that Jesus’ propitiatory sacrifice on the cross was “...to show his righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the

forbearance of God". God's eternal justice as previously mentioned requires God to punish sin. If God left sin unpunished, he would not be eternally just. God had left the sins in the Old Testament ultimately unpunished up to the time of Christ. The sacrifice of Jesus demonstrated that God's divine justice had been satisfied for those sins. Punishment had taken place.

Therefore, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus was the final public vindication of the righteousness of God. This was the antitype to the inadequate atoning sacrifices that took place year after year at the Mercy Seat. This is why it is necessary for one to have faith in His blood today (Romans 5:9). It is only Jesus' act of propitiation upon the cross that could satisfy God's justice in the final sense. The ones at the Mercy Seat, although well-received by God, could not.

A summary of Paul's use of the same word often translated as Mercy Seat is as follows. The book of Romans 3:25 states that Christ is now presented as a propitiatory. Meaning, through the Gospel, God now bears testimony to His blessed Son as the "One by whom He was propitiated, the One by whom His holy wrath against the sins of His people was pacified, the One by whom the righteous demands of His law were satisfied, the One by whom every attribute of Deity was glorified" (Pink). The type of Christ as "the propitiation for our sins" is the Mercy-seat within the veil in the most holy place

Concerning the antitype designation of the Mercy Seat, Arthur Pink writes:

...the Anti-type of the Mercy-seat sets forth the precious fact that God's avenging holiness was fully satisfied by the shedding of the blood of His Son on the cross. Justice instead of being reduced to the necessity of taking a part from the bankrupt has received full payment from the bankrupt's Surety and thus his deliverance is guaranteed. Thus Christ by His life of obedience "magnified the law and made it honorable" (Isa. 42:21), and by His death glorified all the Divine perfections. God's love, grace, and mercy were manifested at Calvary as nowhere else; equally so were His holiness, justice and righteousness. For this reason, then, the Mercy-seat was made solely of pure gold—the Divine glory displayed. Propitiation has been made, and God points all to His

Son, the Propitiatory, as the proof of it; just as the Mercy-seat with the blood sprinkled thereon attested that propitiation had been typically accomplished (Pink).

Conclusion and Application

Although very much misguided, Jews today still celebrate the holiday of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). The Day of Atonement was the day in which the High Priest would make the offering of blood upon the Mercy Seat to provide atonement for the sins of the people. The act of atonement is something to be celebrated; however, it is not celebrated through a Jewish holiday, but instead through weekly observance of the Lord's Supper and immersion into atoning sacrifice of Christ through baptism.

The Mercy Seat as described in the Old Testament would have been marvelous to see. It was fabricated out of the finest materials: it housed the holiest of items and was ornately topped off with statues of angelic Cherubs. Although a marvelous item, its marvelous and glorious nature is nothing compared to what is seen in Christ. The Mercy Seat serves as type of Christ to point one toward Christ. The offerings that took place on top of it are purposefully designed by God to point one forward to the atoning offering of Jesus.

Colossians 2:17 states Old Testament practices "...are a shadow of the things to come; but the body ("substance" NKJV) is Christ's". The Mercy Seat is only a shadow of the substance of complete atonement that can be found through Jesus' propitiatory sacrifice upon the cross. The blood sprinkled upon the Mercy Seat is nothing compared to the completeness and magnificence of the blood Jesus shed so that those in Him today may have "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7).

The application to the observer of this typological relationship is quite clear. It is observed in Scripture that God is perfect and holy and without sin. As truly righteous and sinless,

the Lord cannot ignore sin or evil indefinitely, in any form, for God cannot be in its presence (Isa. 59:1-2). Thus, we need God, but sin keeps us away from Him.

God must also be a God of justice. Because of this, some satisfaction/propitiation for sin must be made. As Paul wrote in Romans 6:23, "...the wages of sin is death". Those who sin are those deserving of punishment. If, therefore, man was to be redeemed, God would have to extend mercy (cf. Ephesians 2:4) in some fashion whereby divine justice could be satisfied. A "death" would be required to remedy the problem (Hebrews 9:22) (Jackson). Sin earns death. God demands death as a sacrifice for sin. The death of a normal sinful person would not be able to eternally atone for sin.

Therefore, the final solution to man's sin problem was realized in the gift of Christ. Jesus lived the sinless life (Hebrews 4:15), and thus was qualified to function as a substitute offering on man's behalf (cf. Hebrews 5:8-9). His blood was more qualified for atonement than the purest of all slain animals. Jesus was our propitiation, our Mercy Seat. It was ultimately through Jesus' death, that God's requirement of justice was satisfied (Romans 3:22-26). Jesus symbolically became a type of the Mercy Seat.

It is through Jesus' typological relationship to the Mercy Seat, that joyously one is able to be reconciled back into a right relationship with God when he or she, through obedience in faith, accepts Christ as His atonement (like figure being the Mercy Seat) offering. Hebrews 9:22 reads, "And according to the law, I may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and apart from shedding of blood there is no remission". Jesus blood was typologically sprinkled upon the Mercy Seat to provide for the remission of mankind's sins. May Christ be eternally praised for this ultimate propitiatory act of atonement.

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