

The Old Testament Cult, a Typology

The religious formation of the Israelites, addressed in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, was a formation that began with the Law and the Tabernacle. It also prefigured Jesus Christ and His Church, reminding us of how the Old Testament always points to the New. Accepting this truth will help us recognize ourselves and today's world in the attitudes and actions of the Israelites as they were led from Egypt to the Promised Land.

As an example, let's focus on the role of the high priest and the great Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*).

In the *Letter to the Hebrews* [Heb 9 & 10] we find this feast presented as a *type* of an even greater Day of Atonement on which Christ offered satisfaction for all of humanity's sins. *Hebrews* also reminds us of the major difference between type and antitype by emphasizing the relationship between the limited nature of atonement by the Old Testament high priest (type) and the complete and perfect atonement of Jesus (antitype).

The high priest, who prefigures Jesus only weakly [Heb 8:1], entered the Holy of Holies with the blood of animals, an act that could not bring about the remission of sins [Heb 10:11-12]. Because of this the Holy of Holies remained closed to all but the high priest, and the ritual, aimed at cleansing sins committed by the people throughout the year, had to be repeated and renewed year after year.

But Christ's sacrifice, His redemptive act, offers full satisfaction for the sins all people in all times, thus opening the gates of heaven to us [Heb 10:20]. Jesus, then, enters the true, heavenly Holy of Holies having sacrificed His own Blood, but He enters only once [Heb 9:12]. And through His act, the veil separating the people from God's Presence is torn, and a personal relationship with Jesus, particularly through His Eucharistic Presence, is open to every person of faith.

From our perspective, the Old Testament rituals might seem weak and inadequate, but these rituals represented a major change, almost a climactic change, from the traditional religious experiences found among the ancients. Their basic tenets:

- † Adoration of the Lord (*Yahweh*) as the One God who suffers no other gods;
- † Recognizing the Lord of History who freely chose this people for Himself;
- † Thanksgiving for the gifts of nature that come from God;
- † God's Law as the basis of our relationships with God and each other;
- † Faith in God and trust in His will;
- † Petition for further help and direction; and
- † Expiation and confession of guilt.

These are all worthy religious concepts and provide a solid foundation for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But it is through Jesus, the Gospel, and the establishment of His Church that He fulfills all that came before Him in the Old Testament.

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When we study the books of Exodus and Numbers we encounter a people struggling with their faith and their acceptance of God's will. In a sense, though, their struggle foreshadows our own journey as Christians.

Looking ahead to the New Testament, we note that the Israelites' response in many respects prefigured that of the apostles and other disciples as they struggled to understand Jesus' plan for them and the meaning of discipleship. At first they followed, declaring absolute loyalty. Then they questioned and, failing to understand, many turned away in fear and confusion. Finally, inspired and strengthened by the Spirit, they accepted and followed the path to true discipleship.

Our Wilderness. Traditional Christian spirituality has long viewed Israel's liberation and wilderness experiences, as described in the books of Exodus and Numbers, as a "type" of the Christian's lifelong struggle to live the Gospel.

As St. Paul reminds us, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" [Phil 2:12]. This was probably a fairly accurate description of the Israelites' mental state as they left Egypt unsure of their destination.

Like the Israelites, we also begin our journey from a place of sinfulness. Our first stop is Baptism, an event foreshadowed by Israel's crossing of the Red Sea. Filled with the Holy Spirit and God's saving grace, and accompanied by the Church and her sacraments, we commence our lifelong pilgrimage, typified by God's guidance of His people as they wander through the Sinai desert. Our hoped for destination is the Promised Land of eternal life, but before we cross the Jordan we must first battle many enemies determined to lead us astray. While Israel, with divine help, battled Hittites, Canaanites, Amorites, and many others, we too need God's grace to overcome the evil one and the deadly sins with which he confronts us.

