

CLARIFYING
BAFFLING
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER SIX

ENDING THE ENIGMA
OF AZAZEL
LEVITICUS 16: 8, 10, 26

Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.

©

2007

All Rights Reserved

VI

ENDING THE ENIGMA OF AZAZEL LEVITICUS 16: 8, 10, 26

INTRODUCTION

Noth (1965: 125) conceded that “the figure of Azazel [in Leviticus 16] remains an enigma,” and Levine (1989: 102) concurred stating, “The precise meaning of Hebrew *‘aza’zel*, found nowhere else in the Bible, has been disputed since antiquity and remains uncertain even to the present time.” However, appeal to several Arabic cognates heretofore ignored when attempting to interpret Lev 16:8–26, may resolve many of the difficult problems related to the etymology of *Azazel*.

In the Septuagint *Azazel* was not read as a name but as a common noun translated ἀποπομπαίω (16:8), ἀποπομπαίου (16:10), and ἀποπομπήν (16:10), meaning “sending away, carrying away” (Liddell and Scott 213).¹ Similarly, in 16:26, *Azazel* was read as a compound of עִז “to separate” and אִזל “to go away” and rendered τὸν χίμαρον τὸν διεσταλμένον εἰς ἄφεσιν “the goat separated for release.” Nor did the Vulgate read *Azazel* as a name but as עִז “goat” and אִזל “departing,” which became *capro emissario* (16:8) and *caprum emissarium* (16:10) “a goat [that] departs.”

The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Clark 1984: 138) took *Azazel* to be the place name of the scapegoat’s destination:

וצפירא דסליק עלוי עדבא ² לעזאזל יתוקם
בחיין קדם ייי לכפרא על סורחנות עמא בית
ישראל לשדרא יתיה ליממת באתר תקיף

וּקְשִׁי דְּבַמְדְּבָרָא דְּצוֹק דִּהוּא בֵּית הַדּוּרִי⁴

(Lev 16:10)

לְמַדְּבָרָא דְּצוֹק וְיִסּוֹק צְפִירָא עַל שׁוּרִיָּא

דְּבֵית הַדּוּרִי⁴ וַיִּדְחִינִיהּ רוּחַ זִיקָא

מִן קָדָם יְיִי וַיָּמוּת³

(Lev 16:22)

And the goat on which came up the lot for *Azazel* he shall make to stand | alive before the Lord, to expiate for the sins of the people of the house | of Israel, by sending him to die in a place rough | and hard in the rocky desert which is Beth-hadurey (Lev 16:10). . . . to a rocky desert; and the goat will go up on the mountains of | *Beth-hadurey*, and a tempestuous wind from the presence of the Lord will carry him away and he will die (Lev 16:22).⁴

The *Beth-hadurey* / בֵּית הַדּוּרִי “the place of a steep hill, spiral road” (Jastrow 1903: 332–333) is a place name analogous to the בֵּית הָרֵן (= *Tel er-Râm*) in Num 32:36, with the בֵּית הַדּוּרִי being the singular of the הַדּוּרִים “hills, swelling places, land swells” mentioned in Isa 45:2, which the Septuagint translated simply as ὄρη “mountains,” whereas the KJV opted for “crooked places.”⁵ It would be a synonym of צוֹק “peak, precipice” (Jastrow 1270). The בֵּית הַדּוּרִי need not mean a particular precipice, but any precipice, just as עֲזָאזֵל was considered to be any hard, rough, rocky, desert mountain or height.

References to *Azazel* in the Talmud (*Yoma* 67^b) and Midrash (*Sifra*, Aḥare 2:8.) treated it as a compound noun rather than as a name. Two phrases are quite clear: עֲזָאזֵל שִׁיְהָא and עֲזָאזֵל קֶשֶׁה שְׁבֵהֲרִים which were translated by (1) Jung (1938: 316) as “Azazel—it should be hard and

rough” and “Azazel, i.e., the hardest of mountains” and (2) by Goldschmidt (1933: 946–947) as “*Ázazel, er muss fest und hart sein*” and “*Ázazel ist der höchste unter den Bergen.*” Goldschmidt and Jung read the עז of עֶזְאֵזֶל as עֶז “strong, firm, rough,” clarified by its synonym קשה “hard, severe, strong” (Jastrow 1060, 1429), which required them to dismiss the אֵזֶל element of עֶזְאֵזֶל.

CLUES FROM ARABIC COGNATES

The Arabic cognates ازل (ʿazala) and عنز (ʿanz), not mentioned in other studies of *Azazel*, permit the following translation of the phrases from *Yoma* 67^b: (1) עֶזְאֵזֶל שִׁיחָא עֶז וְקָשָׁה, “*Azazel* which must be a *rugged height and harsh*” and (2) עֶזְאֵזֶל קָשָׁה שְׁבָהֲרִים, “*Azazel* is any *harsh place* which is in the *mountains*.” These two cognates permit the interpreter to account for *Azazel* being described in the MT, the Targum and the Talmud as מִדְבָּר “wilderness,” הַרְדִּירָא “rugged land, hill, precipice,” and גְּזִירָה “precipice,” along with the modifiers קָשָׁה and תְּקִיף “hard, harsh, rough, and rocky.”

Castell (1669: 73) included in his citation of Hebrew/Aramaic אֵזֶל these Arabic cognates: ازل (ʿazala) “*in angustia statûs, vel anni inopia verstatus fuit*”; ازل (ʿazil) “*angustia summa, penuria & sterilitas*”; and مازل (maʿzil) “*locus arctus & angustus*.” Lane (1863: 53–54) cited ازل (ʿazala) “he became in the state of straitness, or narrowness, and suffering from dearth, or drought or sterility,” and the nouns (1) ازل (ʿazl) “straitness, distress, difficulty, drought, or want of rain,” (2) ازل (ʿizl) “a calamity,” (3) ازل (ʿazil) “straitness, severe, or vehement stress, distress, or great difficulty,” and (4) مازل (maʿzil) “the place where the means of subsistence are strait,

or narrow.”⁶ The **אזל** of **עזאזל** could be the cognate of this Arabic stem (used as a modifier of the **עז** of **עזאזל**), as well as the **אזל** which was a by-form **עזל** (= **عزل** [^c*azala*]) “he removed, he separated,” as understood by the Septuagint translators. Thus, **עזאזל** could have had multiple meanings.

The **עז** of **עזאזל** has yet to be accurately identified. It could be derived from **עז** (**עוז**) “strength, fortitude,” or **עז** (**עוז**) “strong, firm,” or **עז** (**ענז**) “goat.” Lane (1874: 2173) cited **عنز** (^c*anz*) “she-goat”⁷ (which with the **נ** assimilated is the cognate of **עז** “she-goat”) and the homograph and homophone “an eminence, or hill, such as is termed **أكمة** (^c*akamat*) . . . land having in it ruggedness and sand and stones”⁸ Both Arabic cognates may clarify the **עז** of **עזאזל**. The first **عنز** (^c*anz*) (= **עז**) is the synonym of **باطل** (**باطל**) “bad, worthless, useless; applied to a man and to anything.”⁹ It is this **עז** (= **עז**) which was recognized in the Targum and Talmud as a **מדבר** “desert, wilderness” or as a **הרורה** “rugged land, hill, precipice.”¹⁰ The Vulgate, as noted, read the **עז** as **עז** “goat.”

Elsewhere, **עז** appears in Jer 51:53 as a synonym of **תל** “hill, city-mound.” The MT **וְכִי תִבְצֹר מְרוֹם עִזָּה** “though she [Babylon] fortify the height of her strength” (KJV) would be better translated as “though she make inaccessible the top of her tel (i.e., **עִזָּה**).”

Moreover, the **עֲתִי** “timely” of Lev 16:21 (paraphrased variously as “fit” [KJV], “who is in readiness” [RSV], “designated for the task” [NRS]) could well be the cognate of Arabic **أعتى** / **عتى** (^c*itîy*) / **أعتى** (^c*a'tay*) “a man who transgressed the commandment of God,” as used in the *Qur'an* (*Sura* 51:44), “they rebelled against their Lord’s decree” and **عات** (^c*âtî*) “inordinately proud or corrupt” (Lane 1874: 1951). Taking the

scapegoat into the wilderness would have contaminated anyone who was righteous or purified previously. Therefore the goat would be dispatched *בְּיַד-אִישׁ עֲתִי / עֲתִי* “by the hand of an *extremely corrupt* man” (Lev 16:21) who would have to “wash his clothes, and bathe his flesh in water” (Lev 16:26) as an act of purification before he could enter the community upon his return from the harsh rugged mountain terrain.

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

Some have proposed that *Azazel* can be derived from עֲזֹז, the cognate of Arabic عَزَاز (*‘azâz*) “hard rugged ground . . . and the acclivities of mountains and [hills or eminences such as are termed] اکام (*‘akâm*)” (Lane1874: 2032). This derivation requires (1) the ל of עֲזֹזֹל to be a formative addition (like the ל of בְּרֹזֶל “iron” and כֶּרְמֶל “garden”)¹¹ and (2) the א in עֲזֹזֹל to be a disposable “*unessential aleph*,” thus reducing עֲזֹז to עֲזֹל, which could be identified with the גִּזְרָה אֶרֶץ “barren region” of Lev 16:22. But the elimination of two of the five letters of עֲזֹזֹל is very problematic. A better option would be to restore עֲזֹזֹל to עֲזֹזֹל, i.e., אֶזֶל “hard, harsh, difficult, distressful” and עֲזֹז “rugged sloping terrain.”

Others have proposed that *Azazel* resulted from the metathesis of the א and the ז in the name which must have been written originally as עֲזֹזֹל “fierce god,” a spelling which appears in the Qumran texts. This “fierce god” became identified with the name Azmaveth (עֲזֻמָּוֶת) of 2 Sam 23:31, which was thought to mean “*Mot [= Death] is fierce*” (עֲזֻמָּוֶת). Subsequently, the god Mot (= “*Death is fierce*”) be-

came identified with the name of *Azazel* (= “God is fierce”), resulting in the demotion of Mot from being a deity to being just a demon which became known as *Azazel*.

In the intertestamental literature *Azazel* was recognized as one of the “sons of God” who, according to Genesis 6 and Enoch 6, abandoned their heavenly *habitation* for the their *cohabitation* with earthly women.¹²

Milgrom (1991: 44, 1020–1024) argued for *Azazel* being the name of an “eviscerated” demon who lost his personality and became transformed simply into the name of the place to which the scapegoat carried Israel’s sins and impurities—similar to Wright’s conclusion (1992) that the demon’s name was “a place-holder representing the geographical goal of the scapegoat’s dispatch.” Levine (1991: 102), by contrast, preferred to promote *Azazel* to the rank of a demonic ruler of the wilderness, much like the שְׁעִירִים “goat-demons, satyrs” mentioned in Lev 17:7.

The claim by Levine (1989: 102) and Milgrom (1991: 1020) that the initial ל of לְעִזָּאזֵל is the *lamed auctoris*, rather than the equivalent of the locative ה of the following modifier הַמִּדְבָּרָה, would have one goat “belonging to *Azazel* and one “belonging to the Yahweh,” supposedly providing a kind of parity of possession by two unequal supernatural beings. But both goats were “earmarked” for Yahweh and both were marked for death. One was to die upon the altar as a sin offering to Yahweh (לַיהוָה וְעֹשֶׂהוּ חַטָּאת); the other was to make atonement before Yahweh (לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר) as a scapegoat to be dispatched in due time to the wilderness where it would die of straits and distress or perish—falling or thrown—from a precipice, thereby taking all the sins of Israel into oblivion.¹⁴

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Contrary to the opinion of a number of commentators past and present¹⁵ that the *Azazel* in Leviticus 16 refers to a demon to which a scapegoat was dispatched, there is sound philological evidence for interpreting it—as in the Targum and Talmud—as a topographical term having nothing to do with demons. Hebrew עֶזְאֵל can be recognized as a compound of עֶז “rugged peak” and אֵל “difficult, distressful, dearth,” with the אֵל being the modifier of the עֶז. At one time, as suggested by the translations in the Septuagint and Vulgate, the text may well have been לְעֶז אֵל, with a space between the noun and its modifier.¹⁶ Once the space disappeared in the textual tradition, the topographical designation עֶז אֵל became easily confused with names like עֶזְאֵל (*Azaʿel*), עֶזְזֵיל (*Azazêl*), and עֶזְאֵל (*Azazʿel*) (4Q 180; 11Q Temple 26:13), which triggered an easy association with the names of the rebellious angels listed in Enoch 6, which, in turn, made it easy to identify the *Azazel* with the world of demons and demoted deities.

The enigma of *Azazel* in Leviticus 16 can thus be resolved by philology rather than by demonology. A careful examination of Arabic cognates can help in the recovery of meanings of words which have yet to be included in the standard lexicons of Biblical Hebrew—words which were clearly understood by the contributors to the Targum and the Talmud, though unknown to most of the interpreters of these texts. In the case of the *Azazel* tradition in Leviticus 16 (both the MT and the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint), the following Hebrew terms need to be added to the lexicon:

אֶזֶל	“straits, distress, hard, harsh, severe, calamity”
רֹדֵד	“to remove, to repel (from sacred territory)”
זֶל	“slippery ground”
חֲדָר	“slope, declivity, descent”
עֶז	“rugged height, stony hill, precipice, mound, tel”
עֶזֶז	“hard rugged ground, mountain slope”
עֶזֶל	“to remove, to separate”
עֲתִי	“corrupt, rebellious, unbelieving, disobedient.”

NOTES

1. Given the interchange of the **ע** and the **א** of the nouns **אֶזֶלֶא** and **עֶזֶלֶא**, both of which mean a “web” or “net” (Jastrow 1903: 46, 1062), the **אֶזֶל** of **עֶזֶזֶלֶא** was probably read by the Greek translator as the by-form **עֶזֶל**, the cognate of **عزل** (*‘azala*) “he removed, he separated” and its derivative **عزلة** (*‘uzlat*) “a going apart, away, or aside; a removal or separation” (Lane 1874: 2036–2037). The Greek translation could reflect both **אֶזֶל** and **עֶזֶל**, with its *Vorlage* having what appeared to be a redundant **אֶזֶל לֶעֶזֶל** “for separation removal,” rather than the MT **לֶעֶזֶזֶלֶא**.

2. The Targum Onkelos rendered the name as **עֶזֶזֶלֶא**.

3. Compare Ryder’s Hebrew translation of the Targum:

... אל מקום תהו ושלח את השעיר למדבר צוק
ויעלה השעיר על ההרים של בית הדורי
וידחנו רוח סופה מלפני ה' וימות

... unto a wasteland, and he sent the goat to a wilderness peak | and the goat went up upon the mountains which are Beth Hadurey | and a consuming wind of the LORD cause it to slip, and it died.

4. In addition to the **הַרְרִי** cited by Jastrow (1903: 332–333) and Clarke (1984: 138) meaning “hill, spiral road” are these several variants:

(1) **הַרְרִי**, cited by Sokoloff (1992: 216), which would be the cognate of Arabic **حدر** (*ḥadara*) “he made to descend,” and its derivatives **حدور** (*ḥadûr*) “declivity, slope, a place of descent” and **حيدرة** (*ḥaydarat*) “destruction, perdition” (Lane 1865: 530), which would support the tradition that the goat was thrown down from the mountain to its death.

(2) **חַרְרִי** “set free,” (Jastrow 1903: 506) suggesting that the animal was released/set free in the barren terrain where it—and the sins transferred to it—would surely perish.

(3) **חַרְרִיא** (= *Dûdâêl* in Enoch 10:4, for which see Charles 1913: 193, n. 4). The Arabic cognate for the **דֹּר** of **דֹּרְאֵל** is probably **ذود / ذاد** (*ḏûd / ḏâd*) “he repelled, he drove away,” used for example for removing someone or something from sacred territory (Lane 1867: 987).

5. The Vulgate reads *gloriosos terrae*, as though the text were **אֲדִירִים**.

6. The Arabic **أَزَل** (*ʿazal*) also means “eternity with respect to past time, or considered retrospectively; existence from eternity; or ancientness . . . or ever in all past times” (Lane 1863: 54), which precludes it from being used for the idea of everlasting, which is expressed by **أَبَد** (*ʿabad*) “time, or duration or continuance, or existence, without end; endless time, etc.; prospective eternity” (Lane 1863: 4). Thus, *Azazel* could *not* have been an “eternal goat” (**עֶזְאֶזֶל**) which carried away the sins of Israel forever.

7. The Arabic *عنز* (*ʿanz*) was also used for the female eagle, the female vulture, the female bustard, and the female hawk. This suggests that the *עז* definitely means a “she-goat,” which would require the feminine *אֵזָה* for *עֲזָאֵל* to mean “the she-goat went away,” as in the Vulgate’s *capro emissario*. The MT of Lev 16:10, *לְעֵז אֵזָה הַמְדַּבֶּרָה*, could readily be divided to read *לְעֵז אֵזָה* *הַמְדַּבֶּרָה*, which would provide the requisite feminine adjective.

8. Lane (1863: 73) defined *أكمة* (*ʾakamat*) as “a hill, or a mound, a synonym of *تل* (*tel*) . . . a place that is more elevated than what is around it, and is rugged, not to the degree of being stone; or an isolated mountain . . . rising into the sky, abounding in stones.”

9. The fact that the plural of the synonym *باطل* (*bâtil*) signifies “devils” (Lane 1863: 219) may have contributed, directly or indirectly, to *עֲזָאֵל* being interpreted as a demon.

10. The Arabic *زل* (*zil*) “smooth stone” and *زل* (*zul*) “slippery ground” (Lane 1867: 1242; Hava 1915: 293) may be relevant by-forms of *זל* / *אֵזָל* which could explain *Azazel* appearing in Targum Onkelos as *עֲזָזִיל* which could also be read as a “slippery (stony) precipice” (**עז זיל* or **עז זול*).

11. See GKC 85^s.

12. See especially Enoch 6:1–11:22; 13:1ff; 54:5–6; 55:4; and 69:2. Ginzberg (1938: 7: 52–53) has sixteen references to *Azazel* in his index.

13. *Yoma* 67^b includes the statement that *עֲזָאֵל שֶׁמְכַפֵּר עַל* *מַעֲשֵׂה עֲזָא וְעֲזָאֵל*, “Azazel atones for the sin of Uza and Azazel.”

14. Note Milgrom's statement,

... the text takes pains to state that both animals were placed 'before the Lord' . . . and that the goat of Azazel will be placed alone 'before the Lord' (v 10). Here is clear evidence of the Priestly efforts to alter what was most likely in its original form a pagan rite.

15. See KBS II: 806 where eight scholars are cited in support of identifying *Azazel* as a demon in the wilderness, while acknowledging that its etymology is uncertain. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1925, II: 365) had similarly noted:

After Satan, for whom he was in some degree a preparation, Azazel enjoys the distinction of being the most mysterious extrahuman character in sacred literature. Unlike other Hebrew proper names, the name itself is obscure.

16. For another example of how the loss of spaces between words—coupled with the presence of rare words—affects translations, note Pro 30:1, which reads as follows in the MT and KJV:

דְּבַרִּי אֲגֹר בֶּן־יָקֵחַ הַמִּשְׁשָׁא
נָאִם הַגָּבֵר לְאִיתִיאל לְאִיתִיאל וְאָכַל

The words of Agur the son of Jakeh,
even the prophecy the man spake unto Ithiel,
even unto Ithiel and Ucal

But the text, in my opinion, should be properly translated as:

The words of a pious person
rewarded for righteousness,
the declaration of one restored to health:
'Surely God exists! Surely God exists!
I will be kept healthy!'

For a full discussion of this text see below, Chapter XV.