

## **The Mercy Seat**

**By Elder David Pyles**

One of the most sacred objects under the Old Testament Law was the Mercy Seat. This was actually the lid to the famous Ark of the Covenant. In the days of the Tabernacle, this Ark was kept in a small room of this structure that was called the Holiest of All. Only the High Priest could enter this room, and even he could do it only upon a special day of the year. This was on the Day of Atonement. The High Priest then performed an important ritual that was rich in symbolism that foretold of Jesus Christ. This sacred ritual made crucial use of the Mercy Seat (Lev 16:1-17).

The first thing the High Priest did on this day was to burn incense over the Mercy Seat to form a cloud. God claimed that He would appear in this cloud. The Bible offers no comment on the nature of this appearance, and perhaps there was nothing extraordinary about it to the natural eye. The true importance was in the symbolic intent. The Bible elsewhere declares that Christ will appear in clouds at His second coming, and this is what was depicted by the cloud over the Mercy Seat.

Two important verses speaking of Christ returning in clouds are:

*Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen. – Rev 1:7*

*And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. – Mt 24:30*

Both verses claim this appearance will be dreadful to unsaved men. This is because it is a day of final judgment, condemnation and punishment. This is why the Mercy Seat became critical to the remainder of the ritual.

After the cloud was formed with the incense, the High Priest would then take the blood of a sin offering and sprinkle it upon the Mercy Seat seven times. The meaning was that a person would be spared from the ominous implications of the cloud if, and only if, blood were mercifully shed in their behalf. The blood was sprinkled seven times to express completeness and perfection. The blood on

the Mercy Seat was both necessary and sufficient to secure the requisite mercy. This, of course, foreshadowed the blood-bought atonement that Christ would make for His people.

The symbolism was enriched by the fact that the two stone plates with the Ten Commandments were stored inside the Ark. These plates were a symbol of God's law in general, and by this law all men were condemned. But the blood-sprinkled Mercy Seat completely covered these daunting plates.

Before the High Priest performed this ritual, he was to put off his glorious priestly attire and cover himself with plain linen clothes. This was because he was honoring a Messiah who would appear to humans as a poor, common man. However, the High Priest was specifically commanded to be facing the east when performing his procedures. This is because the same Messiah will gloriously return from that direction. Jesus Himself said, *"For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be,"* (Mt 24:27).

The symbolic message of the ritual was the same as the symbolism expressed earlier in the Passover event. When God traversed Egypt in terrifying destruction, He "passed over" and spared only those whose doors had been anointed with the blood of a Passover lamb. This symbolism was repeated 40 years later in the fall of Jericho. The fall of this Gentile city was symbolic of the fall of the world, and a comparison of that event with the prophecy in Revelation will divulge many parallels. Now when the city fell, none of the inhabitants were spared except those with a scarlet, blood-colored, thread in their window.

The ritual done at the Mercy Seat communicated a message of salvation by the blood of Christ alone. When the High Priest did this ritual, the Tabernacle was to be vacated of all other people. Also, the day in which these things were done was designated as a Sabbath wherein no work could be done. Those who violated this prohibition were punished by death. The symbolic intent in this was to forcefully communicate the fact that salvation is not by the work of man, but altogether by the blood of Christ (Heb 4).

Indeed, under the technical specifications of the Law, the blood sprinkled on the Mercy Seat was to secure atonement for desecrations brought on the Tabernacle and its furnishings by the children of Israel. This serves to emphasize the fact that we are

saved by grace in an absolutely unqualified way. Unfortunately, most people tend to think they are somehow saved by their own religious acts. These people do not consider that even their religiosity is contaminated with sin. Isaiah expressed this when he said, “*But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags...*” (Isa 64:6). Therefore, even our best actions are in need of blood atonement, and this implies that our salvation completely derives from such atonement and not from our own acts, whether religious or otherwise. Sound religious actions serve as *confirmation* of our salvation. The *cause* is entirely to be found at the Mercy Seat.

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