

The Meaning of כָּפַר

Some Thoughts as We Approach Yom Kippur

by Tim Hegg

The meaning of the verb כָּפַר and the nouns associated with it (כַּפֵּר, כַּפָּרִים, כַּפֵּרֶת) has been a matter of dispute among the scholars. The older scholarship (represented in BDB) took the view that the Hebrew verb כָּפַר was founded upon a semitic root represented in the Arabic *kafara*, “to cover, conceal, deny, disbelieve, be ungrateful,” and thus was used in the religious cult of Israel in the sense “to cover transgression,” “to conceal sin.” From this came the theological idea that the sacrificial cult of Israel “covered” sin but did not take it away. The removal of sin from the transgressor awaited the final sacrifice of the Messiah.

But this view came under heavy scrutiny. The root *kpr* is attested in the Akkadian base stem *kaparu*, meaning “wipe off, smear on.” This is classified with *kaparu* II, “pour bitumen over” and *koper* II, “pitch, tar, bitumen” and with the so-called D stem *kuppuru*, “to wipe off, clean, rub, ritually purify.”

The idea that כָּפַר has its base meaning “to cover” was strengthened by the fact that the same root is used one time in the Tanach to mean “to cover with pitch,” Gen 6:14. In this case, the verb appears in the *Qal* stem. However, every other place the verb is found in the Tanach, it is in either the *Piel*, *Pual*, *Hitpiel*, or the rare *Nitpiel*. Averbeck notes that “from a methodological point of view, linguistically the same root in a different stem is a different word.”¹ As such, the *qal* should not necessarily be taken to indicate the meaning for the *piel* and other stems. Thus, the suggestion that כָּפַר has as its base meaning “to cover” has been discarded by many current scholars, including evangelical scholars.

The root *kapar* is used some 150 times. It has been much discussed. There is an equivalent Arabic root meaning “cover,” or “conceal.” On the strength of this connection it has been supposed that the Hebrew word means “to cover over sin” and thus pacify the deity, making an atonement (so BDB). It has been suggested that the OT ritual symbolized a covering over of sin until it was dealt with in fact by the atonement of Christ. There is, however, very little evidence for this view. The connection of the Arabic word is weak and the Hebrew root is not used to mean “cover.” The Hebrew verb is never used in the simple or *Qal* stem, but only in the derived intensive stems. These intensive stems often indicate not emphasis, but merely that the verb is derived from a noun whose meaning is more basic to the root idea.²

In general, the scholarly work on this verb has given rise to three suggested root meanings: (1) to cover, (2) to ransom, (3) to wipe away. Obviously, these suggested meanings have some overlap. We may expand the idea of these three as follows:

- 1) to cover = to hide the sin or transgress from the sight of the deity in order to avert his anger.
- 2) to ransom = to make some kind of payment to the deity for the transgression in order to appease His anger.
- 3) to wipe away = to expunge the transgression and to restore the status of *sanctum*, whether to an individual, a group, a holy object, or a holy place/region.

Averbeck, in seeking to establish the meaning of the verb כָּפַר, notes:

1. NIDOTTE, 2:692-93.

2. R. Laird Harris, TWOT, 1:452-53.

It seems that the place to start is neither with the cognate languages nor with other associated words from the same root with Hebrew. Instead, the best place to start is with the simplest and most straightforward internal biblical syntactic structure in which the verb *kpr* is used. This is the occurrence of the verb with a direct object as opposed to an oblique object (e.g., objects introduced by prepositions) or no object at all (see, e.g., Lev 16:32). It is interesting to observe that out of the 13x when the verb has a direct object, six of them are clearly in ritual contexts (Lev 16:30, 33[2x]; Ezek 43:20, 26; 45:20) and seven are not (Gen 32:20[21]; Deut 32:43; Ps 65:3[4]; 78:38; Prov 16:14; Is 47:11; Dan 9:24). They are mutually supportive of a particular base meaning of the piel verb: to wipe away, wipe clean, purge.³

If we accept Averbeck’s viewpoint, that the primary meaning of כָּפַר (the *piel* stem) is to be found in those places where the verb has a clear direct object, then it’s base meaning is to be found in connection with Yom Kippur, for the verb with direct object occurs only in Lev 16 and the comparable passages in Ezek 43 and 45. If this is the case, then the base meaning is “to wipe away,” for in these contexts כָּפַר has a direct effect on *sancta*—it “wipes” *sancta* “clean.” In this way, the *qal* meaning of the verb, “to cover with pitch” is connected to the meaning of the *piel*, “to wipe (with blood).”

In Gen 6:14 we find an instrumental כֶּכַח like that in Lev 17:11, but in Gen 6:14 it means “to cover *with*” pitch whereas in Lev 17:11 it means “to wipe clean *with*” blood. The pitch was a paint-like sealant. The blood was a detergent-like cleanser. Therefore, *kpr* does not derive from cover any more than from ransom. The meaning cover belongs to the same verbal root but in another stem. As noted above, the same root in a different stem is a different word.⁴

Thus, the various words used to translate the verb in English translations (“forgive,” “ransom,” “atone,” etc.) are derivative rather than actual. The sinner is “forgiven” because that which besmirched the *sanctum* has been “wiped clean” by the blood. Since the Israelite is to be holy before God (“you shall be holy because I am holy,” cf. Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7,26; 21:6,8), it is necessary that he be “wiped clean” of his sin through the action of כָּפַר. The same is true of the *sancta* involved in the Tabernacle/ Temple, as well as to the nation of Israel as a whole, and the Land given to her by covenant.

The two texts which bear most significantly on this discussion of כָּפַר are Lev 17:11 and the parallel in Ex 30:11-16.

<p>Lev 17:11 כִּי נַפֶּשׁ הַבָּשָׂר בַּדָּם הוּא וְאֲנִי נִתְתִּיו לָכֶם עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם כִּי־הַדָּם הוּא בְּנַפְשׁ יִכָּפֵר</p>	<p>For the <i>nefesh</i> of the flesh in the blood it is, and I have given it (him) to you upon the altar for <i>kafar</i> with regard to your souls, for the blood it is with the <i>nefesh</i> that will make <i>kafar</i></p>
<p>Ex 30:16 וְלָקַחְתָּ אֶת־כֶּסֶף הַכִּפּוּרִים מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָתַתָּ אֹתוֹ עַל־עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהָיָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְזִכְרוֹן לְפָנַי יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר עַל־ נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם פ</p>	<p>And you shall take the money of <i>kippurim</i> from the children of Israel and you set it with regard to the service of the tent of meeting and it shall be for the children of Israel for a remembrance before Adonai to <i>kafar</i> in regard to your souls.</p>

3. Ibid., 696.

4. Ibid., 699.