



ATONEMENT III: **Personal**

IN STARK CONTRAST to ancient “god-conscious”¹ civilizations such as Assyria, Egypt, Greece and Mesopotamia, the Hebrews “essentially invented Western civilization and shaped Western consciousness today, as they were the first in human history to claim individual freedom, and to presume they could make the future better than the past.” Furthermore, the “Israelites gave the world a sense of history and destiny, concepts of individuality and justice, and the idea of monotheism.”² These contributions emerged from the fact that the Hebrews were the first humans to be endowed with relational self-consciousness. David was the first to articulate the “I” of the individual. “. . . [T]he Psalms . . . are filled with I’s: the I of repentance, the I of anger and vengeance, the I of self-pity and self-doubt, the I of despair, the I of delight, the I of ecstasy.”³ Hebraic self-consciousness thus recognized the divide between creature and Creator and the necessity of a genuine “at-one-ment.”

“Both the Bible and rabbinical theology [in Judaism] reflect the belief that as God is holy, man must be pure in order to remain in communion with Him. Sin and defilement damage the relationship between creature and Creator, and the process of atonement — through repentance and reparation — thus restores this relationship . . .

“. . . [In the Bible] the basic means of atonement is the sacrificial rite, which functions to purify man from both sin and uncleanness . . . In its most spiritualized aspect, however, the sacrificial rite is only the outward form of atonement, and in order for it to be effective, man must first purify himself. . . .

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“After the destruction of the Temple and the consequent cessation of sacrifices, the rabbis declared ‘Prayer, repentance, and charity avert the evil decree’ . . . Suffering is also regarded as a means of atonement and is considered more effective than sacrifice to win God’s favor . . . Exile and the destruction of the Temple . . . were also reputed to bring about the same effect. Above all, death is the final atonement for sins. . . .

“The general rabbinic approach was to deritualize atonement and center it more on the personal religious life of the individual in his relationship to God. . . . [A]fter the destruction of the Temple a man’s table atones in place of the altar, i.e., his everyday behavior is all important.”⁴ In Hebraic thinking this behavior is grounded in personal moral and ethical responsibility and is essential to the “at-one-ment” of mankind with God.

Endnotes

1. See Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990). See also Julian Jaynes Society, “Summary of Evidence,” at www.julianjaynes.org/evidence_summary.php; “Origins,” *Outlook* (September 2001); “The Dawn of Self-Consciousness,” *Outlook* (October 2001); “Life Is Bound Up,” *Outlook* (April/June 2002); “Atonement I: Prehistoric,” *Outlook* (March 2006).
2. Thomas Cahill, “The Official Web Site,” at www.randomhouse.com/features/cahill/bio.html.
3. Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 93.
4. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. (1997), s.v. “Atonement.”