The Mercy Seat

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In John 4:23, Sovereign Jesus declared to the Samaritan woman that the Father "is looking for" "genuine worshipers" who will worship Him "in spirit and truth." Perhaps we have here a window into the reason why God created a race like ours – people in His image with the capacity to choose. God "is looking for" something, which means He does not have it, at least not automatically, or in sufficient quantity. I understand that He wants to be appreciated for who He is, but for such appreciation to have meaning it cannot come from robots – it has to be voluntary. So He created a type of being with this capacity, but with that He had to run the risk that such beings would choose not to appreciate Him! As a result, both He and we, all of us have to bear the consequences of our choices. That is why God allows evil in the world.

In Genesis 1:26, the Trinity said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," and the following verse declares: "And God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him." And in the beginning, it worked. Chapter 3:8 says that Jehovah (the Son) was walking in the garden, and since Adam did not appear, Jehovah called to him: "Where are you?" We can infer that Jehovah had the custom of walking and talking with Adam in the garden. It is obvious that the initiative was with Jehovah; He had to materialize to be able to do that. If He did that repeatedly, it was because He enjoyed that fellowship.

But one day sin entered and ruined everything. So I ask: What could God's holiness do when confronted with man's sin? God's holiness is an aggressive quality that destroys anything unclean that appears. But if it were to destroy the man, it would defeat the purpose of creating him. And what could God's justice do? "The wages of sin is death"; but merely destroying the man would also be a defeat. And what could God's mercy do? The 'wages' would have to be paid by someone. And what could God's love do? It might want to pay the bill, but how could it die? What could God do to satisfy all His attributes? The solution is found in the mercy seat.

The Ark of the Testimony was a box made of acacia wood, overlaid with pure gold, in and out. It was about 45 inches long, 27 inches wide and 27 inches high. That box had a lid, of the same length and width, made of pure gold. That lid is generally called the mercy seat;[1] at each end there was a *cherub* looking in (so he had a face), with two wings stretched inward, also of pure gold, of one piece with the lid. Imagine the complexity of crafting that lid; just making each *cherub* separately would be very complicated [and how would they know the image of a *cherub* they had never seen] (Exodus 25:10-11, 17-20). Exodus 31:1-6 explains that the craftsmen were enabled by the Spirit of God, which was certainly necessary.

Where does the word 'propitiatory' come from? It comes from 'propitiation,' which represents an important theological concept. It represents the need to make amends, to satisfy the outraged character of God, outraged by the sin of man. That would not be an easy thing to do. The entire chapter 16 of Leviticus spells out the required procedure, whose purpose was to make atonement for all the sins of the people. The detailed procedure emphasized the difficulty surrounding a propitiating of God's outraged character.

That lid was the place where propitiation was effected, the place where God's holiness, justice, mercy and love met together to deal with man's sin. Actually, being a copy, it represented here

[1] The KJV called the lid the 'mercy seat', and that designation continues in general use. The term 'propitiatory', used as a noun, would perhaps be more precise.

on earth the true mercy seat in Heaven. It was a temporary symbol that God saw fit to use until the arrival of the definitive solution.

But at first God said to Moses, “there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the testimony” (Exodus 25:22). Apparently this was a privilege that only Moses had, because after that only the high priest could go into the Most Holy Place, and even so, only once a year, and with blood. Access to the mercy seat was protected by several barriers, the final one being the heavy curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Anyone who attempted to enter in an unauthorized manner died on the spot, by supernatural means.

For various reasons, the mercy seat fell into disuse for most of the time between Moses and Jesus. But that did not alter its symbolic value. Repeatedly, God ordered Moses to make everything “according to the pattern” he had received on the mountain (Exodus 25:40). And why did God insist so much? Because the tabernacle, with its furnishings, was a “copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (Hebrews 8:5). Those rules were not changed until the Lamb of God achieved the ultimate propitiation—by the way, it took an infinite Being to pay an infinite price. God Himself tore that curtain in two, top to bottom, symbolizing in a dramatic way that access to God was now potentially available to all. This access was achieved and provided by the definitive propitiation.

But let's review what needed to happen to get to this point. There in the Garden, the Creator told Adam, "You will surely die." That is why Paul wrote in Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death." And Hebrews 9:22 declares: “Without shedding of blood there is no remission”. This statement points back to Leviticus 17:11, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul”. Note that for blood to be on the altar it has to be shed—someone, or something, has to die. Recall that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). In the beginning, the blood of animals was used, but that was only a temporary, stopgap, measure, “because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). So where does that leave us?

For an Eternal Being, time is irrelevant, because He knows the end from the beginning. As the glorified Jesus said in Revelation 22:13, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, beginning and end, the First and the Last”. How could He know that He was the ‘end’ and the ‘last’, if He had not been there? I suspect that time and space may be limited to our solar system, being especially relevant to our planet, as the home of the human race. Without time and space it is impossible to measure the universe.

Now then, for God Himself to set up and decree a stopgap procedure, He must have had a permanent solution waiting for the appointed time. Indeed, this is expressly stated in 1 Peter 1:18-21: “you were redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, as of a faultless and pure lamb; 20 who was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.” This sort of ‘blows my mind’—the Text is saying that the Lamb, with blood shed, was so known before the creation of our race and planet; which means that the Creator knew, before creating, what would happen and the terrible redemption price He Himself would have to pay, yet He went ahead anyway!!

Yes, but how <u>could</u> Jehovah the Son pay? God is spirit, and spirit has no blood. And God cannot die. As incredible as it may seem to us, Jehovah the Son accepted becoming a man in order to have blood and be able to die. Yes, but in order to pay for our sins, He could not sin Himself,

because in that case he would have to pay for his own. He could not have a human father because a man's semen transmits a fallen spirit and contaminated blood. That is why the Holy Spirit provided all the genes that would come from the father, and Jesus was born without contamination, a second Adam before the fall. According to Hebrews 10:5, upon entering the world the Son said, "a body you have prepared for me," and in verse 9, "Indeed, I have come to do your will, O God." By accepting the prepared body, the Son 'condemned' Himself to live 33.5 years in this fallen world without sinning, frustrating all of Satan's attempts to defeat Him. We simply cannot comprehend the humiliation that an infinite Being suffered by being confined within a human body, and who began as a helpless baby. The glorious fact, for us, is that the Son accepted it. Thank you so much, Sovereign Jesus!

To continue, the Lamb of God was the permanent solution. But that permanent solution was not tied to the Ark of the Testimony, with its mercy seat, that was prepared by Moses. As we have already mentioned, Moses had to take care to do everything "according to the pattern" he had received on the mountain because it was a "copy and shadow of the heavenly things." Revelation 15:5 speaks of "the sanctuary of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven." This means that there is a 'mercy seat' in Heaven! Is this not clearly implied by Hebrews 9:11-12? "Christ entered once for all into the real Holy Places, having obtained eternal redemption—He had come as High Priest of the good things that are about to be, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation, 12 and with His own blood, not that of goats and calves." 'Holy Places' being plural, the phrase must include the Most Holy Place, which contains but one piece of furniture, whose principal component is the mercy seat. Christ entered the heavenly Most Holy Place, as eternal high priest, carrying His own blood. And what did He do with that blood? He applied it to the heavenly mercy seat, "having obtained eternal redemption", "so that those who have been called may receive the promised eternal inheritance" (Hebrews 9:15). Again, thank you so much, Sovereign Jesus!

But even that is not the whole story. The shed blood of God's Lamb also served for something else; it served to purify the heavenly things (Hebrews 9:23)! But how could anything in Heaven need purifying? Well, is Satan not a contamination, everywhere he goes? Job 1:6 and 2:1 state plainly that Satan presented himself before the LORD in Heaven, along with other high-ranking angels. If I understand Revelation 12:7-12 correctly, Satan still has access to God's throne. (And if he keeps accusing us, it's because we give him 'ammunition'!) Once Satan is expelled from Heaven, the final cleansing will take place. According to our timeframe, the Lamb's propitiation has already occurred, while the expelling of Satan is still in the future. But to an Eternal Being our timeframe is irrelevant. The heavenly things have been cleansed, by the blood of the Lamb.

The eternal mercy seat, with the infinite propitiation, resides in the heavenly Tabernacle. It is there that God's holiness, justice, love and mercy met together and formulated the definitive solution to man's sin, and all other consequences of Lucifer's rebellion. But exactly how did each of the attributes become satisfied? First, holiness: 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us those sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." If God only forgives us, we will still be unclean. (Ask any mother who has a young son; he's always getting his clothes dirty. She may forgive the act, but washing the dirty laundry is another process.) But how does purification work? 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us that the Father made the Son to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become God's righteousness, for those who are in the Son. The Son took our sin and gave us His righteousness. How can we measure or understand such love! Because God's righteousness is holy, it transforms us into saints, and God's holiness can accept us.

Satisfying God's holiness would be more difficult than satisfying His other attributes. Justice demands that the wages of sin be paid, and this Jesus did. Mercy was satisfied because the sacrifice of the Lamb freed us from the consequences of our sin. Love was satisfied because its ultimate expression or manifestation was found in the sacrifice of the Son (John 3:16). So, to recap: God's holiness alone could not solve the problem, nor His justice alone, nor His mercy alone, nor His love alone – all four were needed, working together. It is that mercy seat that guarantees the Plan of Redemption, with all its ramifications. Oh praise our God!

How many sermons have you heard, or preached, on the subject of the heavenly mercy seat, or even the earthly one? I would suggest for your consideration that this has been a serious omission. The mercy seat should be at the center of any and every exposition of God's Plan of Redemption. Perhaps then people would not be so careless about their relationship with the Sovereign Creator!

In passing, remember that the 'box' contained three items: 1) the stone tablets, engraved by the finger of God, 2) the gold pot full of manna and 3) Aaron's rod that budded—all were covered by the 'lid', the mercy seat. Have you ever considered the significance of those three items? Allow me to suggest the following possibility: 1) the stone tablets represent God's written Revelation to mankind, and its purpose is to orient our conduct, and by extension **our culture**; 2) the manna represents God's provision for our physical needs; 3) Aaron's rod represents God's authentication of His plan of salvation, or redemption—His provision for our spiritual need. All three represent a supernatural, sovereign intervention; God acting to provide well-being to mankind. All three ultimately depend upon the definitive propitiation provided by God's Lamb.

Returning to the history of the Ark, Numbers chapter 4 contains detailed instructions for transporting the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and in Acts 7:45 Stephen said that the tabernacle entered the promised land with Joshua. Indeed, Joshua 18:1 informs us that the tabernacle was set up in Shiloh, which was located in the area occupied by Ephraim. And it remained there throughout the time of the judges until Eli and Samuel, as reported in the first chapters of 1 Samuel. 1 Samuel 1:9 says that Eli was sitting "by a pillar of the temple of the Lord." It may be that during that time the people built a more permanent structure than the tabernacle, but the Ark of the Covenant was still there. And it remained there until the Philistines took it to their land, in chapter 4. The Ark remained with the Philistines for seven months, but God's punishment was so severe that they returned it.

When the Ark returned, it did not go to Shiloh. It went to Kirjath Jearim and remained there for twenty years (1 Samuel 7:1-2). The place was located in the area occupied by Benjamin. Then King David took the Ark from there and brought it to Jerusalem, with a three-month interval in the house of Obed-Edom, because of the death of Uzzah (2 Samuel chapter 6). Once in Jerusalem, it was placed in a tent that David had prepared (2 Samuel 6:17) and remained there until it was transferred to Solomon's temple. It seems that the Ark remained in that temple until Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it and took the gold and silver articles to Babylon. The Ark is never mentioned again in the history of Israel, and its whereabouts are unknown. (Personally, I doubt that God would allow its destruction.) Josephus wrote that it was not in Herod's temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. If that is true, it probably wasn't even in the second temple. Records from Roman history state that Emperor Vespasian used gold and silver looted from the Temple in Jerusalem to help finance the construction of the Colosseum. The Colosseum features a frieze commemorating the destruction of Jerusalem, dominated by an image of the menorah, not the Ark, which aligns with Josephus's account.