

The Guilt Offering

Leviticus 5:14-6:7; 7:1-10

I. Exposition

A. The guilt offering represents a related yet distinct sacrifice from the sin offering.

1. They are related in that they are set apart from chs. 1-3 by the use of macrosyntactical markers (4:1; 5:14; 6:1) and the absence of the phrase, “a soothing aroma to Yahweh.”
2. Yet the details of these sacrifices label them as distinct from each other. They require different animals, involved different procedures, were initiated by different occasions, and were offered for different purposes.
3. Thus, despite the efforts of some to treat the guilt offering as a type of specialized sin offering, the text itself supports the notion that the guilt offering is its own distinct offering.

B. The name “guilt offering” derives from the Hebrew term אֲשָׁמָה (‘*āšām*)

1. In certain contexts, the term carries the idea of guilt—the legal and ethical weight of iniquity (Gen 26:10; Jer 51:5; Ps 68:22; Prov 14:9).
2. In other settings, the term highlights the consequences of guilt—a penalty or reparation necessary to relieve the guilt of trespass against another individual (Num 5:7; 1 Sam 6:3; Lev 5:6, 7).
3. The occurrence of the term in Lev 5:6-7 has led some scholars to think of the guilt offering as a specialized sin offering. But the term there is best seen as referring to the sin offering a “penalty for guilt” (‘*āšām*).
4. When we consider the purpose and function of the guilt offering, it becomes clear that the traditional title tends to obscure the overall picture of the offering, and becomes the reason why there is confusion between the sin and guilt offerings.
5. Thus, Wenham, Rooker, and Ross all suggest that a more helpful name would be one that focuses on the purpose of the offering rather—a “compensation” or “reparation” offering.
6. In the end, the key distinction between the sin offering and the guilt offering is the issue of compensation.

C. Animals for the guilt offering

1. Only a ram or male lamb could be offered as a sin offering (5:14ff; cf. 14:12ff; 19:21-22; Num 6:12).
2. This makes the guilt offering unique, in that it is the only offering that restricts the sacrifice to a single species and sex.
3. However, 5:15, 18 and 6:6, the text notes that the animal be given “in your valuation of silver shekels according to the standard of the sanctuary shekel.”

- a) This phrase is difficult to interpret. Apparently the tabernacle had its own system of weights by which it determined monetary value. Any livestock that was valued had to be done according to the official tabernacle weighting system.
- b) This phrase probably indicates that there was allowance given for an individual who could not bring an animal as an offering could bring a monetary gift of silver shekels that was valued at the same price as a ram or male lamb (NET, Speiser, Wenham). The strength of this view is that, in the end, the compensation involved in the guilt offering is a key aspect of the guilt offering.
- c) Other interpreters hold that this phrase is referring to the value of the animal in relation to the 20% reparation that was required. According to this view, an animal sacrifice was required in every instance. When the animal was presented, the priest would value the animal according to the official scales in order to determine the appropriate reparation fee.

D. Procedure of the guilt offering

1. The details provided for the ritual procedure of the guilt offering are sparse when compared with the other offerings. The text in 5:14-6:7 addresses only the reparation and the animal to be offered. It's not until 7:1-8 that the procedure for offering the animal is provided.
2. The offerer brought his guilt offering to the tabernacle, where he presented it to the priest. Depending on how the phrases in 5:15, 18, and 6:6 are understood, he either (1) could also bring an equivalent monetary gift as a substitute for the animal, or (2) presented the animal to the priest, who valued it according to the tabernacle scales.
3. Next, the individual would present the reparation for the holy thing or person he had violated, which comprised the value of the item plus an additional 20% reparation.
4. Once monetary reparation had been made, the offerer then offered the animal. No mention is made of laying a hand on the head of the animal, skinning it, removing the fat, or quartering it. All this may be implied from the previous sacrifices.
5. The animal was brought to the place of the burnt offering, where it was slaughtered, and the priest splashed its blood on the sides of the altar (7:2).
6. The fat of the animal, including its kidneys and the lobe of the liver, was burned on the altar (7:3-5).
7. The priest who offered the sacrifice would then eat the meat of the animal, symbolizing that Yahweh had received and accepted the offering on behalf of the individual (7:6-7).

E. Occasions for the guilt offering

1. The occasions for the guilt offering are some of the premiere distinguishing characteristics of the guilt offering.
2. The key term which characterizes the requirement of the guilt offering is **מַעַל** (*ma'al*), variously translated as "trespass, violation."

The Guilt Offering

- a) The term could be variously translated as “treachery, violation, unfaithful.”
 - b) The use of the term throughout the OT presents underscores the seriousness of the act. It is used to describe:
 - (1) Adultery (Num 5:12, 27)
 - (2) Idolatry (Num 31:16; Ezek 20:27)
 - (3) Marrying foreigners (Ezra 10:2, 10)
 - (4) Achan’s sin (Josh 7:1)
 - (5) Uzziah’s usurpation of priestly prerogatives (2 Chron 26:16-18)
 - (6) Ahaz’s promotion of idolatry (2 Chron 28:19-25; 29:19)
 - (7) The cause of Judah’s exile to Babylon (Ezek 39:23; Dan 9:7)
 - c) The term carries the idea of an act which constitutes covenant treachery against God. It is defection from covenant allegiance. In other words, these are not mere petty crimes.
 - d) “This sin was thus viewed as sacrilege, as a direct affront against Israel’s God with whom the Israelites were aligned by covenant agreement (Rooker, 123).
3. There are two scenarios presented in which an individual could commit this sin. Each scenario is marked by the phrase, “Then Yahweh spoke to Moses” (5:14; 6:1).
- a) Violation of items consecrated to Yahweh (5:14-19)
 - (1) The first means of committing sacrilege is in the misuse of Yahweh’s “holy things” (5:15).
 - (a) According to Lev 27, anything dedicated by men to God was a “holy thing.” Thus, it could include animals, houses, land, tithes, as well as the meat that was available only for consumption by the priests.
 - (b) “Any violation of the sacred things that belong to the LORD, whether major or minor, is probably included, such as the defiling or unlawful eating of holy things (Lev 5:14-19, 22:14; 1 Sam 2:12-17), defilement of a Nazirite vow by not fulfilling it (Num 6:12), or defilement by skin disease, during which time the LORD was deprived of service and tribute due to him (Lev 14:12-18)” (Ross, 146n6).
 - (2) The second means of committing sacrilege is when an individual suspects he may have defiled a holy thing (5:17-19).
 - (a) Additionally, the law addresses issues wherein an Israelite suspected that he may have violated a holy thing, though he remains uncertain of it (5:17-19). In this instance, his conscience accuses him, and so he was encouraged to present a guilt offering.

- (b) “This then is an instance of a suspected trespass against sacred property, one of the most dreaded sins in antiquity. Someone suspects he has sinned, but does not know exactly how. In his uncertainty he fears the worst, and therefore a reparation offering must be brought” (Wenham, 108).
 - (c) In cases of uncertain violations, a reparation doesn’t seem to be required. The individual simply brought the required animal for atonement and forgiveness.
- b) Violation of fellow man through theft and false oath (6:1-7)
- (1) This second major section deals with violations (*ma'al*) which is committed against other people.
 - (2) Certain scenarios are given as representative examples of how treachery against others might manifest:
 - (a) Deceiving someone about something held in trust, a pledge, or something stolen (6:2)
 - (b) Extorting something from a fellow citizen (6:2)
 - (c) Finding a lost item and failing to report it (6:3)
 - (3) Additionally, each scenario seems to include the common feature that when these actions are committed, the individual then falsely swears an oath regarding his innocence (6:3).
 - (4) In this instance, two acts of treachery have occurred:
 - (a) Treachery against a neighbor by depriving them of something they own
 - (b) Treachery against Yahweh by misusing his name
 - (5) This is why the act can be deemed sacrilege—ultimately, they are sins against Yahweh’s holy name by swearing false oaths regarding.
 - (6) “The violations included here are violations of property rights and legal rights. One may violate another person’s personal rights by unlawful seizure of a deposit or security (6:2), stealing another person’s property (6:2), failing to report finding lost property (6:3), and seducing an engaged servant girl (19:20-22). One may violate another person’s legal rights by oppressing a neighbor (6:2) or by giving false testimony (6:3). All of these were bad enough, but to bring God in on the crime was far worse” (Ross, 151).
 - (7) What is notable about this aspect of the guilt offering is that it provides atonement for a blatant act of sin. The sin offerings (4:1-5:13) and the first part of the guilt offering (5:14-19) dealt with inadvertent sins. But extortion, theft, and perjury are not inadvertent sins. “It seems likely that atonement for deliberant sins was possible where there was evidence of true repentance, demonstrated by remorse (feeling guilty), full restitution (v. 23), and confession of sin (cf. Num 5:6-8)” (Wenham, 109).

The Guilt Offering

- (8) A second notable element of this scenario is the surprisingly low reparation fee required for a crime of theft or extortion. Exodus 22:6ff requires the thief to repay double the value of the item stolen, but here it is just 20%. Wenham comments that “Exodus envisages a situation where the offender is convicted on the evidence presented by the plaintiff, but in Leviticus the culprit confesses his guilt. Making the penalty a low one should have encouraged voluntary surrender” (Wenham, 109).

F. Purpose of the Guilt Offering

1. The key component of the guilt offering is that of compensation. The guilt offering presents sin as an act of sacrilege against God and/or neighbor, which places the offender in debt. Not only did the sinner need atonement and forgiveness, but he also needed to provide restitution that released him from the debt his sin had created. The guilt offering made restitution by paying the debt. Only after he had made reparation, could he be forgiven.
2. “The reparation offering thus demonstrates that there is another aspect of sin that is not covered by the other sacrifices. It is that of satisfaction or compensation. If the burnt offering brings reconciliation between God and man, the purification or sin offering brings purification, while the reparation offering brings satisfaction through paying for sin” (Wenham, 111).
3. Commentators have wrestled over why a guilt offering was required in instances where an individual was seeking cleansing from a skin disease (14:12ff). After all, such a case does not seem to fit the scenarios presented in 5:14-6:7. The best explanation seems to be that the guilt offering represents a payment made to God to compensate him for the loss of service and worship caused by the individual’s uncleanness.
4. Additionally, there is ambiguity in what the ram of the guilt offering intends to represent. “Contact between the holy and the unclean could result in death (Lev 10:1-2; Num 16:16ff). It could be argued that in this sacrifice the ram was put to death instead of the guilty sinner. Alternatively, the ram may be seen as making reparation to God, just as the return of property plus a fifth makes restitution to the man or priest whose goods had been stolen” (Wenham, 109-10).
5. Additionally, the guilt offering presented a tangible expression of an individual’s repentance. “The *asam* offering was in most cases a matter of personal conviction, because often only the LORD and the guilty party knew about the crime. Public acknowledgement of the sin, therefore, was evidence of a guilty conscience, especially when reparation was in order. This was the critical issue, for restoring what was defrauded and being willing to pay the added surcharge showed that the contrition was genuine. Then the offering could be brought to the LORD for atonement and forgiveness” (Ross, 151-2).

II. The Guilt Offering and the New Covenant

A. Relationship to Christ

- a) The concept of sin resulting in debt toward God is reiterated in the NT (Matt 6:12). In fact, the parable of the unforgiving slave illustrates this theological principle (Matt 18:23-35), where Jesus presents sinners as slaves who owe an unpayable debt which has been forgiven (i.e., paid by the master himself).
2. Jesus' instruction to seek reconciliation with a neighbor before presenting an offering at the altar echoes the principle of the guilt offering (Matt 5:23-24). Before the animal could be presented and forgiveness experienced, the offerer first had to make reparation to the individual whom he has defrauded.
3. The most extensive treatment of the guilt offering appears in Isaiah 53, where the suffering and death of this individual is said to function as an אֲשָׁם ('*āšām*), a "guilt offering" (Isa 53:10). Several details help us clarify what this means:
 - a) The servant here suffers on behalf of his people. He is crushed because of the people's rebelliousness, and their iniquity falls on him. This results in his suffering but their wellbeing and healing (53:5-6). This language is clear rhetoric connected with substitutionary atonement.
 - b) The servant is also said to act in a manner similar to a sacrificial offering, and he is compared to a lamb being led to slaughter. Coupled with the previous verses, the passage is clearly sacrificial (53:7).
4. The NT makes a very clear connection between the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 and the atoning work of Christ (Matt 8:17; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Rom 10:16; 1 Pet 2:22, 24-25).
 - a) In this way, Christ's death is seen as a substitutionary sacrifice on behalf of his people. He has taken their place and died on their behalf.
 - b) As a guilt offering, then, Christ's death is seen as a compensation for the sins of the people, making them righteous.
 - c) "Jesus' death must be understood as a guilt offering that has removed the debt we owe to God. This notion is certainly the basis for the proclamation that Jesus 'paid' for our sins" (Rooker, 126).
 - d) "It therefore seems legitimate to regard Christ's death not only as the perfect burnt offering, peace offering, and purification offering, but also as the perfect reparation offering, the sacrifice which metaphorically compensates God for our sin" (Wenham, 112).

B. Application to Believers

1. Our sin created an unpayable debt we owed to God, which was paid in full by Christ when he died on the cross.

The Guilt Offering

- a) Because Christ's death paid our debt in full, it is no longer necessary to compensate God for our sin—everything has been paid in full.
 - b) Any attempt to repay God is viewed as an attempt to add to the finished work of Christ.
 - c) *We could never repay God ourselves—unless we went to hell. In order to pay our debt and still live, Christ had to pay our debt for us.*
2. Reparation is part of repentance.
- a) Believers are called to produce fruit “in keeping with repentance” (Matt 3:8).
 - b) Part of that fruit is the willingness to make reparation when possible and warranted.
 - c) This is exemplified in Zacchaeus' willingness to repay all the money he had stolen (Matt 19:8-9).
 - d) “Showing remorse for sin is not sufficient in cases where the wrong can be corrected; making reparation is required in those situations” (Ross, 147).
3. Believers are called to respond to their conscience.
- a) When an individual suspected that they had defiled one of Yahweh's holy things, they were expected to bring a guilt offering on the basis of their conscience.
 - b) Likewise, believers are to act in faith toward our consciences. To think we have sinned but not respond in repentance—even if we're not sure—is to ignore our conscience and not act in faith (Rom 14:23).