

GUILT AS UNDERSTOOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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In spite of wealth, mobility and opportunities for advancement in American society, beyond the wildest dreams of even a generation ago, peace of mind and a clear conscience are by no means traits of the average American. Not only does drug abuse reveal deep inner conflicts, but violence, restlessness and loneliness point to serious maladies in the soul. Individuals are afflicted; group demonstrations of various kinds with strident slogans indicate corporate concerns about war and pollution. A burden of guilt rests upon the hearts of many people.

Reading a recent book, *Guilt and Grace*, by Paul Tournier, has sparked a new interest in the subject in my own thinking. Being a Christian as well as a doctor, Dr. Tournier constantly relates current guilt problems with instances in the Scriptures which show remarkable parallels; many references are to the Old Testament. This correlation caused me to turn again to the Word in the Old Testament to look more closely at the concept of guilt. The study has been instructive.

Research has brought the realization that the Hebrew language preserved in the Old Testament lacks a word which is restricted to guilt. In this respect the Hebrew differs from English, for the English word, "guilt" denotes responsibility for offenses committed, the fact of having committed breaches of conduct, the state of deserving punishment or the state of being liable to penalty. The English language has a basic word, "sin," for the act of committing an offense toward God and man and another word, "punishment," for the act of executing a penalty. In addition the English language has synonyms for each of these words but the three categories of committing the act of offense, the condition of

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guilt and the act of punishment are quite clearly kept separate. Not so in the Hebrew language in the Old Testament.

When dealing with the concept of guilt in the Old Testament, one soon learns that the term, *'asham*, and its cognates, is the basic word with which one must wrestle. But *'asham* does not always mean "guilt." In fact English translations of the Old Testament vary markedly in regard to its meaning in almost every passage in which it occurs. Basically, the King James Version prefers the word "trespass" which denotes the act of committing an offense, whereas the Revised Standard Version prefers the word "guilt" which designates a condition or state of being. The New English Bible often uses the word "guilt" but does not hesitate to utilize such terms as reparation, compensation, penalty and punishment much more than the other two versions.

To a more limited extent, the same is true of Hebrew words such as *'awon*, normally translated in KJV as iniquity, and *rashá'* mostly rendered as wicked in KJV. Both are translated as "guilt" or "guilty" at times; more recent versions employ these words even more frequently.

It would appear necessary, then, to begin with a word study of *'asham* in order to arrive at an Old Testament understanding of guilt. Next, this study will probe the relationship between sin, guilt and punishment or atonement, since these three items seem to be blended in the Hebrew mind. Finally, an attempt will be made to draw relevant applications in regard to present day interest in the phenomenon of guilt.

General Observations about *'asham*

The Hebrew word *'asham* and its cognates occur slightly over a hundred times in the Old Testament: thirty-seven times as a verb, sixty-three times as a noun, and three times as an adjective. The word appears forty-one times in Leviticus alone. The only other book in which it appears as many as nine times is Ezekiel. It occurs in nineteen other books only a few times each.

Life Situation Passages in Which *'asham* Occurs

An excellent way to discover the meaning of a word is to view it in action in a down-to-earth context. Fortunately, *'asham* occurs in such contexts. It would be well to examine a few of these passages.

Genesis 26:10. Isaac had told Abimelek that Rebekah was his sister, but Abimelek discovered otherwise. In his rebuke, Abimelek said,

“One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.” (RSV). Even KJV uses “guiltiness” here. The possibility of the act precedes the use of *‘asham*, hence, the phrase in the New English Bible (hereafter NEB), “make us liable to retribution” is also apropos.

Genesis 42:21. Though Joseph’s brothers did not recognize him, Joseph’s hard demands awakened fears. “They said to one another, ‘in truth we are guilty concerning our brother . . .’”(RSV). Again, quite out of character, KJV uses “guilty” though NEB has “deserve to be punished.” Memories harked back to their cruelty to Joseph and they regarded this turn of affairs as a punishment.

Judges 21:22. A war with the tribe of Benjamin had wiped out all but six hundred men. A problem arose in that the men of Israel had taken an oath that none of their daughters could be a wife of a Benjaminite (21:1). Restoration of peace and of the tribe seemed to entail provision of wives for this tribe. Four hundred virgins were obtained from a raid of punishment on Jabesh-gilead; the remainder were captured from a festival at Shiloh. An interesting rationale for this act was devised. The girls were not taken in a battle situation; the men of Shiloh had not violated their vow by giving the girls to the tribe of Benjamin so why should there be a complaint? Their fellow Israelites had saved them from being guilty (*‘asham*) of breaking a vow. The word *‘asham* is understood as the consequence of a breach of oath.

II Samuel 14:13. A wise woman of Tekoa had been prompted by Joab to make an appeal to King David in such a way that he would be moved to restore Absalom to the family circle. In verse nine he said, “On me be the guilt (*‘awon*)”, as the consequence of the king’s decision, but in verse thirteen she said, “For in giving this decision the king convicts himself (*‘asham*)” (RSV); he had violated parental responsibility to an exiled son. The KJV reads, “as one which is faulty,” which conveys the idea that David was doing wrong, an act. RSV and other versions stress self-condemnation as an aftermath of the act.

I Chronicles 21:3. The numbering of Israel was regarded by Joab as a wrong action. He argued that the act would be a “cause of trespass,” (KJV), “bring guilt” (RSV, NEB). Verse seven indicates that God was displeased.

II Chronicles 19:10. The word guilt, *‘asham*, appears twice in this passage; the first one stresses guilt as the result of breaking God’s commandments. The second one applies to the judges, who must warn the people of this fact lest they become guilty.

II Chronicles 24:18. Judah's acts of idolatry are the cause of God's anger. The term '*asham*' is translated by KJV as "trespass," RSV has "guilt," but NEB has "wickedness." Is '*asham*' a label for the acts or the consequence of the acts, the middle term between sin and punishment?

II Chronicles 28:10. The same could be asked in regard to this occurrence; Is KJV and RSV's rendering "sins" correct or is NEB right in using "guilty"? A prophet refers to the cruel acts of war and of making men and women slaves. The men involved are given alternatives: return the captives or face the anger of God.

II Chronicles 28:13. This passage is a continuation of the same incident; the elders refer to the same acts as "trespass" (KJV), "guilt/guilty" (RSV, NEB). Does '*asham*' refer to the acts themselves or the consequence of the acts, namely, liability to penalty before the Lord?

II Chronicles 33:23. In context, Amon had done acts of idolatry. KJV says, "he trespassed more and more," but in the same phrase RSV and NEB use "guilt." He had not humbled himself before the Lord so his servants killed him. '*asham*' does seem to be the middle term between the acts of sin and God's punishment.

Ezra 9:6, 7, 13, 15. This chapter is a prayer of confession and Ezra is shown as heavily burdened for the "trespasses" (KJV) "guilt" (RSV, NEB) of the Jews before the Lord. He pleads for divine mercy. The acts of sin are mostly in the past, so RSV, NEB would appear to be correct.

Ezra 10:10. Here the three versions being consulted agree that the act of marrying pagan women is the focus of the word '*asham*'.

Psalms 5:10. This verse is ambiguous as to the meaning of '*asham*'; translations vary from "destroy" (KJV), "bring ruin" (NEB) and "guilt" (RSV). The preceding verse describes the condition and acts of the wicked. Is the plea a request that God label them as guilty, or a request that the guilty, wicked people be punished?

Psalms 34:21,22. Here a contrast is set between the wicked and the righteous, between punishment and redemption. Guilt (*'asham*) is not the middle term between the act of sin and the act of punishment, but punishment itself.

Psalms 68:21. Quite the opposite is true in this passage; '*asham*' is the act of sinning, and punishment is threatened. No condition between the two is suggested.

Psalms 69:5. This passage stresses guilt as the inner consequence of acts of sin. The Psalm is loaded from beginning to its end with expressions of turmoil of soul, yet '*asham*' is not translated as guilt but as

“wrongs” (RSV), “guilty deeds” (NEB), and “sins” (KJV). God knows his condition and the Psalmist seeks a way out by pleading for mercy and salvation. To him this is a viable alternative to punishment. There are other Psalms which portray this same distress because of sin, though the word “guilt” is not part of their vocabulary and this same search for pardon (cf. Psalms 25, 32, 38, 51, etc.).

Here is part of the problem: in literature containing the clearest expressions of guilt feelings, the Hebrew word for guilt, *‘asham*, refers either to acts of punishment (Psa. 5:10, 34:21) or acts of sin (Psa. 68:21; 69:5).

Proverbs 14:9. In a series of antithetical parallelisms, the fool is contrasted with the righteous, but what of the function of *‘asham*? Both KJV and NEB connect it with the attitude of the fool; KJV has “mocks at sin,” and NEB has “too arrogant to make amends,” hardly the same meaning. The RSV has God as the subject and *‘asham* as meaning wicked.” None of these carries the connotation of the English word, “guilt”.

Proverbs 30:10. In this verse *‘asham* does have the meaning of guilt; it is the consequence of the past act of slandering a servant before his master. Neither of these passages portrays the sting within of guilt nor do they refer to punishment for it.

Amos 8:14. Amos has a curious form; a feminine noun (*‘ashmah*) has the connotation of the name of a goddess of Samaria (RSV and NEB), or it may be considered as a euphemism for her name (KJV). The passage does tie the term to idolatry.

Hosea 4:15. Israel had played the harlot with idolatry and Judah is exhorted not to likewise “offend.” (KJV or “be guilty,” RSV). It is uncertain whether Judah was not to play the harlot, or not to incur guilt; KJV could have the better reading. NEB sees a guilt-offering instead.

Hosea 5:15. Ephraim had broken God’s covenant laws and had been punished, but the Ephraimites needed to realize their “offense” (KJV) or “guilt,” (RSV) i.e., that they were sinners before God. The next step would be to “seek my face . . . early,” because salvation is possible.

Hosea 10:2. Israel had gone after idols; she had a divided heart and was now “faulty” (KJV), also translated as “bear their guilt” (RSV). Note the rendering in NEB, “they are mad.” Guilt is understood as the consequence of acts of idolatry and a complement of the divided heart (“crazy,” NEB). Punishment must follow.

Hosea 13:1. This verse has a contrast with Ephraim's past acts of pride and idolatrous practices. KJV understands 'asham to signify "offended," in the sense of acts of sin, but both RSV and NEB use the word "guilt," or "guilty." Guilt as a consequence of sin could be the thrust here but the next verse mentions continuation in sin, so the exact function of 'asham is not clear.

Hosea 13:16. The RSV renders 'asham as "guilt," but both KJV and NEB prefer "desolate." Thus, guilt is either the rationale for punishment or the result of punishment. There had been rebellion and iniquity, but even in punishment there is an alternative. Hosea does not hesitate to move immediately into a call to repentance and confession that there may be salvation.

Isaiah 24:6. In a context of a history of sinning against God, earth's inhabitants are "desolate" (KJV), "suffer for their guilt" (RSV). Here 'asham is the end result of sinning.

Joel 1:18. This passage has a similar rendering, except that sheep are the sufferers and sin is not involved in their actions.

Jeremiah 2:3. Those who devour Israel, "shall offend" (KJV), "became guilty" (RSV), or "No one . . . went unpunished" (NEB). This verse illustrates the uncertainty of translators. KJV stresses the act of sin, RSV the condition of guilt, and NEB the end result of punishment. Which is the interpretation? The last phrase in verse three speaks of evil in the future. It would seem that 'asham is the middle term, guilt, in this passage.

Jeremiah 50:7. In this case, those who devour Israel protest that "We offend not" (KJV), or are "not guilty" (RSV, cf. NEB). The tension of meaning is again between the act of sinning and the consequence of guilt because of the act. Yet the act of devouring Israel had taken place and the next step (v. 8) mentions punishment for Babylon. The word 'asham would seem to be the middle term, guilt.

Jeremiah 51:7. Here is the tension again; KJV understands 'asham to be "sin," but RSV and NEB has 'full of guilt.' But the force of the passage is that in spite of guilt God was going to bring salvation to Israel and destruction to Babylon.

Ezekiel 16:6. Guilt as the final term is quite clear in this passage; it is the condition after the act of punishment has taken place.

Ezekiel 22:4. On the other hand, guilt is the middle term in this context. Blood had been shed and idols had been worshiped. The consequence is guilt accompanied by reproach from other nations and punishment which will follow (v. 15).

Exekiel 25:12. With a device of syntax which, in Hebrew, intensifies the power of the verb (imperfect plus infinitive absolute), the prophet says that Edom had “greatly offended” (KJV, cf. RSV). NEB has “incurred lasting guilt.” There is no indication that the Edomites felt guilty, nevertheless God declares He will punish them.

Habakkuk 1:11. This reference is to the Chaldeans who plunder violently; they thus “offend” (KJV), or are “guilty” men (RSV). Curiously, NEB uses “dismayed” for *‘asham*. The word seems to be subsequent to the acts of violence. Possibly, the guilt is complementary to those acts.

Zechariah 11:5. Rulers of Judah disclaim guilt (*‘asham*) or wrongdoing while killing people in Judah. They even bless the Lord while doing it. But God will punish; absence of a sense of guilt does not let a sinner go scot free.

Thus whether one examines the function of *‘asham*, the primary Hebrew word for guilt, in historical narrative, in poetry, in proverb or in prophetic utterance, one finds an easy movement from the application of the term as referring to the acts of sin, to the responsibility before the Lord for those acts, to the punishment, and to even the aftermath of punishment. Translators often suffer doubt concerning just how to render *‘asham* in separate instances. One may conclude that the term stands for the totality of man’s alienation from God, with its consequences.

Genesis 42:21 and several Psalms allude to or describe the inner agony of conscience, which is a trait of guilt, but this condition is not the main force of guilt. Guilt is all that happens to a person when he rebels against God, and punishment is not the only destiny which faces a guilty person. There is also the possibility of salvation by means of repentance, confession and the extension of mercy from God.

Purposely, all references which describe worship practices which are connected with guilt have been delayed for consideration. Most of these passages are in the book of Leviticus, but not limited to it. A consideration of these passages is now in order.

All the verbal forms of the root, *‘asham* occur in chapters four, five and six of Leviticus. Sins of individuals against any laws of God, or against the rights of people, even a slave girl, bring guilt. Uncleanness or profaning holy things brings guilt.

Normally, correction of the guilt involves restitution in terms of cash values plus a twenty percent cash penalty. With this restitution for wrongdoing, an animal of specified value must be brought to the priests,

confession made and the animal slain in a specified manner. The goal of this procedure was atonement and divine forgiveness. This sacrifice is called the guilt offering and it is described as an alternative for the punishment which would otherwise come from God. The guilt offering (RSV, NEB) or trespass offering (KJV) is mentioned twenty-five times in Leviticus as for this purpose. Besides this masculine noun form, the feminine noun form, *ashmah*, occurs in Leviticus 4:3; 6:5, 25; and 22:16 in relation to an offering. The same combination of verbal forms (guilt) and noun forms (guilt offering) is found in Numbers 5:6, 7, 8; 6:12; and 18:9, for the same purpose of atonement.

An interesting story is related in I Samuel 6:1–21. The Philistines desired to return the captured ark so they sent with it five golden tumors and five golden mice as a guilt offering. This offering seemed to be compensation for damages to the honor of Israel's God and to seek his favor, so that punishment would cease. A burnt offering accompanied the return of the ark.

II Kings 12:16. The "trespass money" (KJV), or "money of the guilt offering" (RSV, NEB) is mentioned as being kept in the temple (cf. Nu. 5:6–8). This was the restitution money which could not be paid directly to the person/s injured.

Ezra 10:19. Mention is made of a guilt offering to the Lord because of guilt incurred by marrying pagan wives. Hope of reconciliation with God was promised (10:2–4) and punishment was threatened (10:8).

Ezekiel 40:39; 42:13; 44:29; 46:20. The guilt offering is mentioned in each of these verses but information is limited to the place of making the offering and who could eat it.

The climax of the use of *'asham* in the Old Testament is found in Isaiah 53:10, in which the Suffering Servant is designated as the "offering for sin," (KJV, RSV, cf. NEB). Like the ram, this One was not involved in acts of sin; He was the bearer of sins of other people. He was appointed by God for this purpose, to provide salvation for God's people. Philip declared that this person was Jesus Christ (Acts 8:35), and to this identification the Church has been a witness throughout the centuries.

Summarizing Observations

In the Old Testament, guilt is a much broader term than is its English equivalent, including in its scope the acts of sin, the responsibility for those sins, the divine act of punishment, even including the aftermath of that punishment, and also the divine act of making atonement for sin.

Guilt is not simply liability to penalty under criminal or civil law; guilt is the total situation of alienation from God and the concept obtains its meaning from its correlating phrase, "before the Lord." The overarching framework is the covenant of God with Israel. Guilt denotes any aspect of a breach of that covenant and any divine act of dealing with that breach, whether it be punishment or atonement.

Guilt is accompanied by painful injury to sinner and victim, by a troubled conscience, by shattered emotions, by disrupted social relationships, by the displeasure of God, by the terrible price of death in either punishment or atonement.

Guilt is the experience of all people, for all are sinners though not all are under the covenant of God with Israel. Since idolatry is the common practice of pagans, there is no escape from being guilty, for idolatry is closely tied with guilt in the Old Testament. No man can clear himself by his own efforts from guilt, though he may try to disclaim responsibility for his sinful acts. God insists that sin and guilt go together, and He makes clear what is sin. Only God can provide a way out of guilt. Human rationalization will not do the task; only divine grace can.

The plan for guilt is made plain in the Old Testament. A person must recognize that he is a sinner and responsible for his acts. He must repudiate his own sins and make restitution for damages inflicted. He must publicly confess his sins before God and earnestly seek His mercies. A substitute for punishment must be provided that atonement might be made and guilt removed. Under the Old Testament system a ram was the substitute but the Suffering Servant was to take its place. In Jesus Christ this substitution has taken place, and identification with Him is necessary. The removal of guilt restores the sinner into the covenant fellowship of God and his people. A new hope, a new future is opened before him.

In comparison with the Old Testament concept, much of modern, secular psychotherapy is shallow indeed. Too often the religious dimension is ignored, which means that the nature of man's sense of alienation is misunderstood. Assumptions that man's troubled soul can be fairly easily cured have often been naive. Fortunately, repeated failures of cure have sparked second thoughts, and a new interest in the religious dimensions of inner conflict has been developing. Paul Tournier's book, *Guilt and Grace* is an example of this new interest.

The broad meaning associated with guilt in the Old Testament, (the New Testament has only six passages in which guilt is mentioned) could be a corrective to the narrow English meaning which is limited to

either a troubled conscience or a legal liability to penalty. Guilt is an extensive and serious aspect of human existence and should be treated as such. Best of all both the Old and New Testaments offer an adequate and effective cure for guilt, the only real cure available, even today.