

Offerings for Sin in Leviticus, and John Wesley's Definition

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We are all familiar with the standard Wesleyan definition of sin: 'the willful transgression of a known law of God'. The purpose of this paper is to examine this definition in light of a key Old Testament text on sin, and to consider this definition in the light of that examination.

It is not my purpose to discuss what Wesley meant by this definition. My starting point is contemporary use of this definition as a shorthand answer to the question, 'what is sin?', and the difficulties that creates for presenting to the larger Christian world a proper understanding of both sin and its remedy which can be seen to square with the explicit biblical evidence.

Wesley's Context

First, though I do not intend an extensive treatment of Wesley's position, it is necessary and instructive to mention the instances in which Wesley uses this definition, and to direct attention to the contexts in which it appears.

Wesley defines sin in this way five times (as recorded in his works), twice in the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, and three times in the Letters¹. The first appearance in the *Plain Account* and probably the most quoted, is in Wesley's relation of the minutes of the Conference of 1759 in answer to the question, 'Do you affirm, that this perfection excludes all infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes?'

¹ I wish to thank Dr Herbert McGonigle for providing me with the list of references.

The Conference affirmed the following:

- (1) Every one may mistake as long as he lives.
- (2) A mistake in opinion may occasion a mistake in practice.
- (3) Every mistake is a transgression of the perfect law. Therefore,
- (4) Every such mistake, were it not for the blood of the atonement, would expose to eternal damnation.
- (5) It follows, that the most perfect have continual need of the merits of Christ, even for their actual transgressions, and may say for themselves, as well as for their brethren, 'Forgive us our trespasses'.²

Wesley went on to explain in famous words:

- (1) Not only sin, properly so called, (that is, a voluntary transgression of a known law), but sin, improperly so called, (that is, an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown,) needs the atoning blood.
- (2) I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions...
- (6) Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please: I do not, for the reasons above-mentioned.

These explanations make clear that Wesley saw mistakes as transgressions which require the atoning work of Christ, or else one is subject to eternal damnation. Yet, having said that, he does not call these transgressions sins.

² *Works* 11:395-6. The same discussion follows on p 418, from 'Further Thoughts on Christian Perfection', 1762.

Wesley's development of this definition is further explained in a letter of May 31, 1771, to Miss March. Responding to her letter, Wesley replies,

There cannot be a more proper phrase than that you used, and I will understand your meaning; yet it is sure you are a transgressor still – namely, of the perfect, Adamic law. But though it be true all sin is a transgression of this law, yet it is by no means true on the other hand (though we have so often taken it for granted) that all transgressions of this law are sin: no, not at all – only all voluntary transgressions of it; none else are sins against the gospel law...³

This contrast between the Adamic law and the gospel law also appears in a letter of March 23, 1772, where the law of love is the opposite pole to the Adamic law.⁴ The Adamic law, according to Wesley, is the perfect law given to Adam at his creation. No one can fulfil that law now, since it requires actual (pre-fall) Adamic perfection. Transgression of that law is not a sin if the principle of the heart is love. This is the thrust of Wesley's earliest use of the definition, on June 7, 1761:

A mistake is not a sin, if love is the sole principle of action; yet it is a transgression of the perfect law...But is 'a voluntary transgression of a known law' a proper definition of sin? I think it is of all such sin as is imputed to our condemnation. And it is a definition which has passed uncensured in the Church for at least fifteen hundred years.⁵

³ *Letters* 5:255.

⁴ *Letters* 5:313.

⁵ *Letters* 4:154-5.

This is enough to state the terms of Wesley's definition of sin, with which his heirs must wrestle. Key to our later discussion is Wesley's placing of the law of which there is transgression beyond the written Torah, by going back to Adamic perfection.

Wesley's Heirs

The difficulty raised by Wesley's definition is what to do with sins of omission or of inadvertence.⁶ This difficulty has been addressed on a few occasions in recent Wesleyan discussion. One of the most recent is that of Richard S Taylor in a 1987 article in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*. Taylor's argument had five points.⁷

First, he draws a difference between 'a legal concept of sin and the ethical'. The legal approach is that of objective law; the ethical is 'law plus subjective factors – knowledge, intelligence, opportunity, intention'. The former is a standard which must be met, and for which the guilty must bear responsibility. However, sin, in the sense of condemnation, may not be imputed, even though there is guilt. This, apparently, is the ethical law from which Wesley's definition is seen to derive.

This leads to Taylor's second point, which is, in effect, to highlight the distinction between intention and 'un'-intention. These are distinguished 'intentional *sinning* and unintentional *transgression*' (emphasis mine, the difference in terms is significant). Reference is made here to Leviticus 5 and 6 (the sin and guilt offerings), Numbers 15:30 (defiant sin), and Deuteronomy 21 (cities of refuge). The latter, with the case

⁶ This very point is raised by H McGonigle in a private letter to William Greathouse in response to his treatment of Wesley's definition in his recent book, an extract of which letter I have been given.

⁷ "The Question of 'Sins of Ignorance' in Relation to Wesley's Definition", *WTJ* 22 (1987), 71-77.

of a murdered person found in a field, is referred to in order to highlight the requirement of atonement for the shed blood, but also the need for absolution of the innocent neighbours of liability. Legal and moral blamelessness each have their place.

There are three points to note in the argument thus far: one, Taylor utilises a terminology of distinction between types of sin which appears to echo or reflect Wesley's terminology – legal and ethical sins. However, the examples used for legal sin refer specifically to the Torah of Sinai rather than to the perfect, Adamic, law. We will return to this. Further, the distinction between 'sinning' and 'transgression' seems to be a splitting of fine hairs which leads to no resolution (particularly in light of his following definitions of sin). Finally, the biblical, and notably OT, references, with the fullest attention given to the last, do not illustrate the point being made.

Taylor's third point is the 'question of the *relationship of atonement to legal sin*' (italics in text). Here is the nub of the discussion, in which Wesley's definition is seen to create a tension: Wesley would not call mistakes sins, yet he insists they are transgressions which require atonement. Taylor takes the argument into deep waters, acknowledging a 'puzzling moral maze' in the question, for which he suggests as a partial solution that 'the kind of shortcomings and failures most damaging in the sanctified are *the step-children of sin, not finiteness*; as such they *in some degree* [emphases mine] defile God's universe and dishonor God no matter how unintentional'. Unfortunately, the term 'stepchildren of sin' is not explained, nor is biblical rationale suggested for such an idea.

But, to buttress this approach, Taylor surveys, in his fourth point, the biblical vocabulary of sin. These he finds to be

‘highly ambiguous’, and permitting great flexibility in the use of the term. He decides that *hattat* (sin)⁸ is so imprecise that it can bear either an ethical or legal connotation, as also ‘*’sh̄m ’h* (guilt). On the other hand, the terms with strong ethical content, ‘*avon* (iniquity) and *peha*’ (transgression/rebellion) are never used for ‘sins of ignorance’. His survey concludes that in the NT, *hamartano* carries the full range of connotations of sin.

It is not altogether clear to me what purpose the philological survey was meant to serve. No conclusion is made that directly addresses the use of the terms. The evidence *seems* to be meant to establish an acceptable differentiation between terms for sin which can be related to ignorance, and terms which have to do with intention and wilfulness. But this is never tied in with the role of atonement in relation to each – the starting point of the survey.

The exercise, on the whole, therefore, is not very convincing. In the first place, terms (legal vs ethical) are imported to the biblical texts which are not clearly related to a biblical terminology, to create the desired bifurcation in the concept of sin. Further, the lexical summary of terms for sin provides little insight into the ways in which each term is used in the Bible. The simple fact is that each term is used in a variety of contexts, with various shades of meaning. But this does not make them ambiguous and flexible, as Taylor concludes; to the contrary, a study of the contexts in which a term appears provides more understanding of the nature of sin, properly *or* improperly so called, than an attempt to remain true to Wesley’s definition – or, as in this treatment, Wesley’s terminology – may allow.

⁸ I use here the traditional standard translations of these terms.

Summary and Way Forward

This is the main difficulty as I see it: Wesleyan discussion has tended to work from Wesley's definition back to the scriptures, within a theological treatment, rather than to examine the definition in light of the scriptures.⁹ Additionally, subsequent treatments, such as Taylor's, deal with the biblical material – particularly OT – without taking into account Wesley's own treatment which pushes the definition of law back to Adam rather than to Moses.

The main thrust of the project which this paper represents can now be stated: to begin a biblical study of sin by direct examination of the biblical contexts which deal most directly with a definition of sin. For this I have chosen Leviticus 4-5. There are a number of reasons for doing so. One, these chapters deal specifically with distinctions between intention and inadvertence or omission. Two, because these are the most referred to texts in previous discussions. But, above all, because they also provide us with all of the significant terminology of sin and atonement in a context which is primarily concerned with sin and its expiation.

First, of course, we must justify this choice in relation to Wesley's Adamic law. The primary justification is that it is impossible to discuss the perfect Adamic law since Adam did not leave us a text! (It seems slightly disingenuous to define sin on the basis of a law which is not within reach when we are all dependent on an understanding of sin which derives from a later law. It is somewhat akin to doctrines of authority based on autograph manuscripts which we do not possess!)

⁹ It is notable that the most accessible published treatments of 'sin' in Holiness circles has been written by other than biblical scholars. Metz and Turner are often turned to first for definitions (even in Purkiser's 'Biblical' theology of holiness).

Rather, I go to Leviticus because it is the first specific presentation by the Lord, to Moses, of how he intends to deal with sin. Within this passage, and its larger context, sin is defined, and its cure prescribed. From these data we may, then, be able to work backwards to Adam, and forwards to Christ (although this will not be within the scope of this paper).

The Expiation of Sin in Leviticus 4-5

Context

I have just alluded to the canonical context of Leviticus. I now turn to this in more detail. Leviticus begins where Exodus ends: the Tabernacle has just been constructed according to the Lord's commands, and the glory of the Lord immediately fills the tent in cloud. The Lord summons Moses to speak to him at the tent of meeting, and his first words are about offerings. The tabernacle, having been built as a dwelling place for the Lord in the midst of His people, is the place where His people may come into His presence. When anyone wishes to come into His presence, the Lord says, he is not to come empty-handed, but with an offering of sacrifice. Chapters 1-7 spell out these offerings and their purposes, and thus answer the question, "What must I do to come into the presence of God?"

This question is based on another aspect of the context, i.e., the covenant relation of Israel to YHWH, which answers a prior question, 'What right do I have to come into the presence of YHWH?' All of the laws of sacrifice and purity,

as well as the code for living in the Land (that is, all of Leviticus), are set within the covenant relation. Israel has entered into covenant with YHWH, to be His people, and He their exclusive God. These laws are focussed on how they may remain within that covenant relationship with a holy Lord.

I stress this point because it makes a great difference in our understanding of both sin and expiation in Leviticus. The laws of offerings are not about how to *enter into* relationship with YHWH, but how to *maintain* fellowship. Covenant relation is the given. As evangelical Christians, our faith is soteriologically driven. That is to say, the Good News is viewed primarily as about how to enter into relationship with the living God. For Israel at Sinai, and, indeed, for Jews today, the primary reference is not salvation, but sanctification.¹⁰

This viewpoint should not be lost on us. The Torah is an explanation of the life of holiness. It is how to live in the presence of the Lord. As Holiness people we will do well to move beyond the strictly negative view of the Torah which comes to us via the Reformation's adoption of Paul, and come to grasp what is vital concerning sanctification from the Lord's words to Moses.¹¹ The stress is not on entrance, but on life within relationship.

There is another contextual note which must be made. This is the central importance of blood in the offerings.¹² Leviticus

¹⁰ See the words of Jacob Neusner on this count in 'Midrash in Context'.

¹¹ Of course I refer to the Lord's speech purposely, as the canonical drive of the book. Its sociological setting is another matter, yet one which I would place close to the NT period, in a post-exilic setting.

¹² There is a squeamishness about discussion of blood sacrifice in contemporary Christianity, which threatens to dismiss its role completely from discourse. Whereas I can sympathise with the

17, the hinge of the book of Leviticus,¹³ summarises this significance, ‘For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement’ (v11). Life is in the blood. Life is precious, and inviolable. All life belongs to God, thus all blood must be claimed and returned to God. Every offering, therefore, is a reminder of life. Blood poured out, which is life given, is a reminder of the costliness of sin, for sin brings death.

The animals to be given in offerings are restricted to three species: cattle, sheep, and birds. Leviticus also restricts flesh which may be eaten to these species. These are holy, *שְׁרֵט*, and only animals offered at the sanctuary may be eaten. So, eating flesh was a regular reminder of the people’s holiness, or separation, from sin and to the Lord.¹⁴ The opposite of holiness in Leviticus is uncleanness, *tame’*. Impurity becomes equated with death, which must be purged and expiated. As Jacob Milgrom puts it, ‘Israel is therefore instructed to observe the life-giving and life-sustaining commandments of God.’¹⁵ Israel seeks to control impurity lest it impinge on God’s sphere, which is holy. The attention of Leviticus is on ritual purity, yet the purity to which these offerings point is not restricted to the external. The great Day of Atonement, which consists of one goat which purifies the temple of all the sins which have accrued over the year, also consists of a goat which eliminates moral sins, iniquities, which are then

reluctance to look at a symbol of violent loss of life in our violent times, I fear the loss to essential Christian faith if it is jettisoned wholesale.

¹³ See Mary Douglas, *JSOT*.

¹⁴ Following Jacob Milgrom, “Rationale for Cultic Law: The Case of Impurity”, *Semeia* 45 (1989), 106.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

pronounced 'forgiven'. The external points to the internal, and cannot be separated from moral issues.

These notes serve to place the offerings in a context for interpretation. The offerings are commanded to people within covenant relationship, i.e., they are about a life of sanctification. And the whole of that life is a choice for life. Milgrom, again, concludes, 'It was not death, but life that Israel was to pursue.'¹⁶ In the shedding of blood life was affirmed.

The Laws Concerning Offerings

Turning to the offerings themselves, there is one further preparatory note. Traditionally we focus on the aspect of sacrifice in these chapters, and interpret them in terms of substitution and atoning death. This NT focus, which finds its fulfilment in Jesus' sacrifice, tends to limit the value of these chapters to type and foreshadowing. While not diminishing this aspect, it is worthwhile to consider the positive purpose here: these are offerings to the Lord, a part of worship, and often in a spirit of joy and thanksgiving.

1. *The Burnt Offering.*

The first offering commanded is the Burnt, or Whole, Offering. In Christian interpretation this is considered the principle expiatory sacrifice. G J Wenham, for example, comments, 'The burnt offering was the commonest of all the OT sacrifices. Its main function was to atone for man's sin by propitiating God's wrath.'¹⁷ However, this is not true of

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 105.

¹⁷ G J Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT), 63.

Jewish interpretation, nor a growing body of Christian thought, which marshals the evidence from the practice of the Burnt Offering throughout the OT. In these instances the primary purpose of the offering is thanksgiving. Baruch Levine summarises in this way, 'The object of this sacrifice...was to send the aromatic smoke of the offering heavenward, where God would, it was popularly believed, breathe in the pleasing aroma of His people's gift.'¹⁸ Expiation, he says is 'not suitable here because as a type of sacrifice the '*olah* was not occasioned by any offence that would have placed the offender in need of expiation.'¹⁹

We cannot enter into the background of these comments in this space.²⁰ We can, however, find a middle ground in the discussion. Expiation is not the primary purpose of the offering, but Lev 1:4 clearly places it in an important place. Perhaps John E Hartley provides a better balance in his summary, 'As an atoning sacrifice the whole burnt offering was offered not so much for specific sins but for the basic sinfulness of each person and the society as a whole...the frequent presentation of whole offerings enabled the covenant community, despite the human proneness to sin, to maintain fellowship with the holy God.'²¹

In summary, the Burnt Offering is the most important and basic of Israel's offerings. One important facet of it was atonement, but this was not the primary atoning offering. A look at chapter 16, where you would expect the burnt offering to be central but where it is not, will reveal this to be true.

¹⁸ B Levine, *Leviticus* (JSP Torah), xiii.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 6.

²⁰ This will get into questions of the development of the laws of sacrifice in the Torah, Ezekiel and the later OT books.

²¹ John E Hartly, *Leviticus* (WBC), 17.

The primary means of expiation in Leviticus is in the two offerings of chapters 4 and 5: the purification and reparation offerings (sin and guilt offerings in traditional translation). To these we now turn.

2. *The Offerings of Expiation*

The section 4:1-5:26 (MT; 6:1-8 ET) can be divided into four, each beginning with the same formula, “When a person sins..” (4:1; 5:1; 5:14; 5:20[6:1]). There is some difference of opinion as to the way in which these sections go together. Most divide into two parts: 4:1-5:13 as the Sin/Purification Offering; 5:14-26[6:8] as the Guilt/Reparation Offering.²² Others divide into three parts, with 5:1-13 as a separate offering completely, the Graduated Purification Offering.²³ Whichever way these are divided, there are four aspects of sin dealt with in two ways: purification for inadvertent sins (4:1-35); purification for sins of omission (5:1-13); reparation for inadvertent sins (5:14-19); and reparation for deliberate sins (5:20-26[6:1-8]).²⁴

a. *The Purification Offering*

Traditionally known as the ‘Sin Offering’, the offering of most significance for an understanding of atonement is the *hatta’t*. The noun is derived from the verb ‘to sin’, and as an offering has the basic sense of ‘to de-sin’. However, its function leads to the more common contemporary translation. This offering is presented when impurity has been contracted, or when a law has been transgressed, unintentionally. The

²² Wenham, 86, and Hartley, 49-50. See Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 308, who includes de Vaux, Noth, and Elliger.

²³ So Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 307f., citing rabbinic tradition in support.

²⁴ Following Wenham, 86.

blood of the offering is sprinkled on the altar (or curtain, or holiest place, depending upon the status of the person offering), thus purging the holy place of the sin.

This is a fascinating conception of sin, as something which not only defiles the individual who has sinned, but also defiles the place where God dwells. The offering must be presented before any other offering, for it clears the way to the presence of the Lord by purifying it. Only when this is complete will the Lord accept other offerings. The corollary of this is that there is, therefore, no wholly private sin, but all sin has social repercussions. Every individual sin adds to the pollution of the holy place, and as that sin builds up it threatens the very nation; for the moment will come when the Lord will tolerate no more, and withdraws His presence from His people (as happened to Israel in Ezekiel 10-11). On the Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16, the holiest place is purged of all accumulated and un-atoned for sins and iniquities of the past year.²⁵ Yet, even this is contingent on the true repentance of the people, and the evidence of that in their lives.

The Purification Offering, therefore, purges impurity and expiates sins (4:20,26, 31,35) so the people may live in the presence of the holy God ‘with enthusiastic joy’, as Hartley puts it.²⁶

The condition for forgiveness is that the sin must have been unintentional. This offering is not efficacious for deliberate sins.²⁷ It is in relation to this fact that we need to look closely

²⁵ Milgrom points to another corollary of this point. The ‘good’ people who perish with the evildoers (as in Ezekiel) are not innocent. For, in allowing the evildoers to flourish, and thus pollute the sanctuary, they share the blame for the destruction of the nation; 288f.

²⁶ Hartley, 57.

²⁷ I shall not refer to Num 15:30-31 in contrast to this statement. I see Numbers as a development of Lev 5:20-26, and so not applicable to this passage.

at a key term in these chapters: *'asham*. To use the case of the 'ordinary person' (*'אדם רגיל*) as an example, we look at 4:27:

If anyone...sins unintentionally in doing any one of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done, he *incurs guilt* (*we'asham*).

Jacob Milgrom has argued repeatedly and at length that this final phrase, which is one word in the Hebrew, be translated 'when he feels guilty'. The verb standing alone, he states, refers to 'the inner experience of liability, that is, "to feel guilty"'²⁸, and so, has a psychological component. This translation seems to leave much to subjective feeling, and suggests that the guilt is not in effect until the guilt feelings come.

On one hand, this seems a questionable view. Adrian Schenker has taken issue on this point, and cites the Philistine guilt in 1 Samuel 5 as an example where a 'guilt offering' is presented for liability which had not been felt. He puts the concept of guilt feelings, which originates with rabbinic thought, down to Hellenistic-Roman views of responsibility that implies free-will and choice. This, he says, is not present in Leviticus 4 and 5.²⁹

Additionally, we in our modern/post-modern age will find the idea that feelings of guilt may be trusted a strange one. In a recent news story of a prominent music performer caught in compromising circumstances in a public toilet, the musician said that he was sorry for the way his sexuality has been discovered, but feels no guilt, nor any reason why he should

²⁸ Milgrom, 243 and 342f.

²⁹ A Schenker, "Once Again the Expiatory Sacrifices", JBL 116 (1997), 697-699.

feel guilt.³⁰ However, in the ancient near east, where bonds of solidarity to the community and to one's God were keenly felt, the discovery of an unknown transgression of the norm would undoubtedly lead to strong feelings of guilt, leading to action to expiate the wrong in order to be restored to full relationship to the community and to God.

Even so, as Hartley rightly states, '*asham* must have 'an objective usage for a person's ethical/legal culpability, rather than for a person's existential feelings'.³¹ For this reason, Kiuchi's translation, 'realise guilt', is a preferable reading.³²

The point of this detailed discussion is to highlight the importance of recognising that even unintentional sin incurs actual guilt. It cannot be dealt with until it comes to light, to be sure, but one cannot depend wholly on the feelings of guilt to be a sure guide. There are other ways of 'realising' guilt. For Wesleyans, there is need to affirm this fact – as Wesley himself did in the *Plain Account*. Such unintentional sins require expiation, atonement/*kipper* (so throughout these chapters), and forgiveness. The word for forgiveness, *nislah*, is in the passive form, emphasising by this 'Divine Passive' that the Lord alone grants forgiveness. His acceptance of the offering means *restoration to grace*. Through the *hatta't* reconciliation is affected. A Wesleyan doctrine of sin and grace can surely encompass what this offering provides.

b. *The Graduated Purification Offering*

³⁰ *The Guardian*, 13 April, 1998, 3.

³¹ Hartley, 77.

³² N Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature*, Sheffield, 1987.

Chapter 5:1-13 presents a number of difficulties in interpretation which we cannot address in this paper. As has been mentioned, some see this as a continuation of the purification offering, an appendix which deals with borderline cases; and others see it as a separate offering. Whichever way we see this we still must deal with the case study in verse one, where the failure to bear witness is clearly a deliberate sin. The remaining three cases, in verses 2-4, come under the less damning heading of ‘sins of omission’, which can be more finely described as transgressions that were committed knowingly (such as contracting impurity) but from which the individual forgot to purify himself in the prescribed period of time. When he remembers, he realises his guilt, and expiates with a purification offering.³³

The first example, however, is a problem. The conclusion of verse one makes clear that the one who sinned ‘will be held responsible’³⁴; or, that ‘he is subject to punishment’(NRSV). These are translations of the phrase *nasa’ awono*, ‘he carries his iniquity’ – again, the sin bears consequences for the sinner, whether it is deliberate or by mistake.

Milgrom handles the problem of the deliberate sin in a way which reflects unreadiness to allow room for atonement of deliberate sins: ‘The answer’, he says, ‘lies in his subsequent remorse, a factor not stated in the case itself, but in the general protasis...; it is his subsequent guilt feeling that is responsible for converting his deliberate sin into an inadvertence, expiable by sacrifice.’³⁵ – that is, a deliberate sin, for which there is no atonement, becomes qualified for atonement on the basis of

³³ Milgrom, 312-313.

³⁴ Hartley, 45.

³⁵ Milgrom, 293.

confession of guilt. Another response, that of Adrian Schenker, sees a distinction between intentional sins ‘without malice’ in this section, and those ‘with malice’ in Lev 5:20f.³⁶ Deliberate sins without malice are subject to expiation through the purification offering.³⁷

Clearly this section moves the discussion from sins of ignorance to areas where the sins will be known by the individual either while he is transgressing, or through the presence of witnesses (as in contracting impurity in public, or speaking a rash oath). They encompass situations of unpremeditated transgression. Equally clearly, the readiness of the Lord to forgive in such cases is dependent upon immediate confession, and, thus, repentance. There is a way to maintain fellowship with God even after known and sometimes deliberate transgression of a law of God: contrition.

b. *The Reparation Offering*

Chapter 5:14 moves us into commands for restitution in addition to an offering. This offering, the *‘asham*, is traditionally translated as ‘guilt offering’ since it is based on the term for guilt, or culpability/liability. It is better termed ‘Reparation Offering’ since its express purpose is to provide for the return of goods plus ‘compensation’ of 20% to the offended parties. In vv 14-19 the injured party is the Lord Himself, and so the reparation is made via the priest. In 20-26[6:1-7] the injured parties are other people, and compensation must be made to them.

³⁶ Schenker, 698.

³⁷ Recent evangelical commentators, interestingly, do not address the point: cf Hartley, 68, a Wesleyan; Wenham, 100.

The new term which is introduced in this offering is that of ‘breach of faith’³⁸, or ‘sacrilege’ (*ma’al*).³⁹ This is a phrase normally used in the OT for faithlessness against a covenant partner, such as a wife against her husband, or a breach of faith against God (cf Achan and Ahaz). Here this offence is against ‘holy things’, which suggests such things as eating the portion of meat which is to be offered to the Lord, or presenting inferior animals for sacrifice, etc. As insignificant as these may seem to us, they represent breaches of the covenant. The way back into the presence of God in such cases is not only through purification/expiation, but also restitution.

The last section of our passage is perhaps most perplexing. Lev 5:20-26[6:1-7] speaks of sins of deception, fraud, robbery, and lying. These are not accidental mistakes! Yet, there is expiation for these. How can this be explained in light of Numbers 15:30-31, which says there is no atonement for deliberate, ‘high-handed’ sin? This is what Schenker calls ‘sin with malice’.

Notably, all of these are sins which have no witnesses, so cannot come before human courts. Only God knows about them, so they will only come to light if the sinner himself confesses them. This seems to be the key to understanding this passage. The Numbers reference to ‘defiant’ sins is speaking of sins which the sinner has no interest in repenting. Here, the sinner repents, and seeks forgiveness. He admits his guilt. According to the *Mishnah*, this is sufficient: expiation is allowed because the offender has come forth and confessed his crime (*Bava Metsia* 6). And, according to Jacob Milgrom,

³⁸ Hartley, 76.

³⁹ Milgrom, 319.

the confession and reparation turns a deliberate sin into an inadvertence, and so qualifies the sin for expiation.⁴⁰

In what way does this discussion address our topic? In terms of 'breaches of faith', this offering surely informs our understanding of how one is restored to grace after stumbling. With regard to deliberate sins, breaches of faith against our neighbours, the place of confession and reparation is vital to reconciliation both towards God and the neighbour.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this look at the two expiation offerings of Leviticus opens the subject for further discussion of the Wesleyan definition of sin. Wesley's careful efforts to clarify that even mistakes are breaches of the perfect law, and are therefore subject to the need of atonement, need to be more prominent in our own teaching and preaching. Yet, perhaps his uneasiness about calling those mistakes sins is inadequate biblically.

The Purification Offering proves to be a provision of immense importance for Wesleyan theology. It is that which deals specifically with unintentional transgressions (or, involuntary' transgressions of a known law). In NT terms, it increases our appreciation of the continual cleansing from all sin promised in 1 John 1:9. It recognises the full extent of guilt, but does not thereby condemn. Rather, it provides the way for renewed relation with the Lord. It is realistic about human proneness to sins; but it offers grace and forgiveness within the covenant relation.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, 345f.

This description of the provision for sin is important because it makes clear how sinful sin is; yet, it shows how forgiving grace may be.

The Reparation Offering is more in keeping with good evangelical practice already. Yet, it is also more amenable to Wesleyan theology in its provision for a way back for the backslider through confession and restitution. Perhaps our Wesleyan understanding of sin, and the grace which brings whole relations, should incorporate the concept of restitution and reparation in counselling those who have wronged others.

This last section is, in some ways, easier for us to fit into our evangelical practice of repentance, and holiness practice of restoration to grace. But, how to compensate God?...

Finally, these verses remind us that a sinner is guilty whether or not he realises or feels guilty, but can only find forgiveness when he realises and confesses his guilt. Western society does not wish to accept guilt. Every evil is always someone else's fault. We cannot, perhaps, fault the world at large for ducking responsibility for sin. But the church must be awake to real guilt, and purify her sin, lest the glory of God depart – and we don't even know.