

The Nature of Sin and Guilt in the Old Testament

And God solemnly declares, "... I will not justify the wicked,"¹ nor "... will by no means clear the guilty...."²

The fundamental idea of sin in the Old Testament is that of rebellion against God, and in the language of the prophets this is disobedience to the moral requirements of God. Isaiah cries:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for Jehovah hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.

How is the faithful city become a harlot! she that was full of justice! righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers.³

The Hebrew Concept of Sin

The concept of sin in Hebrew thought falls into four classes according to the principle words and their usage. The four classes are expressed primarily by the Hebrew words: חָטָא, "to miss, to sin"; רָשָׁע, "to be wicked"; אָשָׁם, "to be guilty"; and כָּשָׁע, "to rebel." The term חָטָא⁴ is the common word for sin in the Old Testament and its literal meaning is "to miss the mark or goal," and answers to the Greek ἀμαρτάνω. It signifies *the failure or falling short of the goal or standard intended by God*, and includes wrong done toward either God, man, or oneself.⁵ The term רָשָׁע, "to be wicked," emphasizes *the inner character of the sinner*. The רָשָׁע, wicked, are often contrasted with the צַדִּיק, the righteous.⁶ The term usually denotes one who is guilty of crime or disobedience and deserving punishment; the cause of his sin being his

¹Exodus 23:7.

²Exodus 34:7.

³Isaiah 1:2, 21.

⁴The word חָטָא is used in its original meaning "to miss" in Judges 20:16.

⁵Isaiah 42:24; I Samuel 26:21; Proverbs 8:36.

⁶Deuteronomy 25:1.