



Daily Verse and Comment

Leviticus 16:5

(5) And he shall take from the congregation of the children of Israel two kids of the goats as a sin offering, and one ram as a burnt offering.

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Each year on the [Day of Atonement](#) ([Yom Kippur](#)), the high priest performed an elaborate ceremony consisting of four sacrificial animals (see Leviticus 16). He offered a ram as a burnt offering, a bullock as a [sin offering](#) for the high priest and his household, and two goats together as a sin offering. These two goats receive the most attention on this day. A vital detail in this ceremony is that the two goats *together* accomplish atonement for the nation.

Notice [Leviticus 16:5](#): "And he shall take from the congregation of the children of Israel [two kids of the goats](#) as a [singular] *sin offering*" (emphasis ours throughout). This instruction is unusual, for the ordinary sin offering consisted of a single animal (see [Leviticus 4:3](#), 14, 23, 28; 5:6-7). Why did [God](#) command two animals as the sin offering for the nation?

To answer this question, we must first examine the typical sin offering, outlined in Leviticus 4. There, God commands four slightly different rituals, depending on who had committed the unintentional sin: a priest (verses 3-12), the whole congregation (verses 13-21), a leader of the people (verses 22-26), or an individual (verses 27-31).

Regardless of the transgressor, though, the priest conducted the same basic procedure—one to take note of, for it helps to explain the Day of Atonement ceremony. In the standard sin offering, the guilty party first laid his hands on the sacrificial animal ([Leviticus 4:4](#), 15, 24, 29). This action symbolized the innocent animal taking the place of the sinner, figuratively transferring the guilt of the person to the animal. Second, the animal was killed. Third, the

priest sprinkled some of its blood in front of the veil, and he put some on the horns of either the golden altar (used for incense) or the brazen altar (used for burnt offerings), depending on who sinned. He poured the rest of the blood at the base of the brazen altar. Finally, select parts of the animal were burned on the brazen altar, while the rest of the animal was burned outside the camp.

The procedure for the sin offering essentially ends there, but more needs to be considered. The offering has symbolically cleansed the guilty party, but is the sin truly gone? In this regard, the [book of Hebrews](#) teaches us that 1) animal blood is used for symbolic *cleansing* and *purification* ([Hebrews 9:13, 22](#)); but 2) the blood of bulls and goats cannot *take away* sins ([Hebrews 10:4](#)). In the ritual of the sin offering, then, the transgressor is symbolically cleansed, yet his sin is not taken away—it cannot be removed simply through the shedding of animal blood.

To further understand the symbolism of blood and sin, remember that God repeatedly prohibits the eating of blood ([Genesis 9:4](#); [Leviticus 7:26-27](#); [17:10-14](#); [19:26](#); [Deuteronomy 12:16](#)). Even though the animal to be eaten is dead, God still considers the blood of the animal to contain the life of the animal! [Deuteronomy 12:23](#) proclaims, "Only be sure that you do not eat the blood, for *the blood is the life*; you may not eat *the life* with *the* [lifeless] *meat*." Blood is a symbol of life, even after the heart has stopped! It is a representation—even a record—of the life lived. Thus, the first usage of blood in Scripture is anthropomorphic: God considered Abel's blood to have a voice even after Cain had cut his life short by violence ([Genesis 4:10](#)).

If the blood of an unblemished animal represents an innocent life, the blood of an animal upon whose head sins have been transferred represents a sinful life. Therefore, while the transgressor is symbolically cleansed of his sins after laying his hands on an innocent animal and shedding its blood, the substituted blood still bore witness—a record—of the transgression. In some scenarios, priests could eat the meat of a sin offering, but because of the symbolic defilement of the blood, if any of its blood got on the priests' garments, they had to be washed ([Leviticus 6:27](#)). There is no such proscription for the blood of burnt offerings or peace offerings, in which blood is shed yet which do not involve sin.

Because of this symbolic, sin-carrying quality of blood, it is as if the horns of the golden or incense altar—covered with the blood of countless substitutionary animals—became a repository for all the nation's sins, sins that still had to be taken away (compare [Jeremiah 17:1](#)). This is shown by God's command that the incense altar—specifically the horns, where the defiled blood was placed—had to be cleansed once a year:

And Aaron shall make atonement upon [the altar's] horns once a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonement; once a year he shall make atonement upon it throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD." ([Exodus 30:10](#))

The incense altar was symbolically cleansed once a year through the high priest "mak[ing] atonement" upon it, meaning he would cover it with blood that did *not* represent sin. This verse gives the essence of what was to happen on the Day of Atonement, while Leviticus 16 provides all the specifics of how God's instructions were to be carried out.

— David C. Grabbe

To learn more, see:

[Why Two Goats on Atonement? \(Part One\)](#)

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