

Exodus 30:11-16

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-30/exodus-3011-16/>

The LORD describes what can be labeled as a “tabernacle tax.” Moses was to take a census and receive a “ransom” (a half a shekel) from everyone twenty years or older. The money was to be used to maintain the tabernacle.

Once again, *the Lord also spoke to Moses*. This time, however, it concerned the situation *when you take a census of the sons of Israel to number them*. The phrase “take a census” is literally “lift up the head of” in the Hebrew text. It is similar to the saying “take a head count.”

The rest of verse 12 states that *each one of them shall give a ransom for himself to the Lord*. The word for *ransom* (Heb. “koper”) is often translated “atonement” (see [Exod. 29:33, 36, 37; 30:10](#)). It is used in parallel with the word “redeem” in [Psalms 49:7](#). It has the idea of presenting a substitute in order to be atoned for. Thus, the concept of ransom is associated with the idea of atonement.

Jesus Christ presented Himself as a “ransom” ([Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6](#)).

This ransom was to be given *when you number them, so that there will be no plague among them when you number them*. The word for *plague* (Heb. “negep”) is often used to describe when someone physically strikes another person with malice (see [Exodus 21:22](#)).

There was the idea in the Ancient Near East that taking a census was an occasion for pride and thus could result in judgment by the gods. So, a collection was taken to appease the gods’ anger.

Indeed, when David did an unauthorized census ([I Chron. 21:1](#)), the LORD “struck” Israel with a *plague* in which 70,000 men were killed ([I Chron. 21:14](#)). In this account, there was no mention of a ransom. Later, David offered a sacrifice and the LORD stopped the *plague* ([I Chron. 21:26 – 27](#)).

Verses 13 – 15 describe the nature of the *ransom* that *everyone who is numbered shall give*. It was to be *half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs)*. A “half a shekel” was about 0.2

ounces (or 6 grams) of silver. In 2020 US dollars this would be roughly \$5. This *half a shekel* was designated as a *contribution* (Heb. “terumah,” a “heave offering” – see [Exodus 29:28](#)) *to the Lord*. A *gerah* was a Babylonian unit of weight. Those who needed to be numbered were *everyone...from twenty years old and over*. It was these Israelites who were required to *give the contribution to the Lord*.

The nature of the *ransom* was such that *the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to the Lord to make atonement for yourselves*. The *ransom* was the same for both *rich* and *poor*. The LORD is no respecter of persons. A *rich* person does not have an advantage when it comes to their standing before the LORD. Here, everyone had an equal amount to pay for ransoming their lives. This is symbolic in that the price for redemption is the same for all people. Also implied here is that each person was responsible to pay their own *ransom*.

The purpose of the ransom money is stated in verse 16. The LORD told Moses he *wasto take the atonement money from the sons of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting*. The *money* was dedicated for use in the worship of the LORD who delivered them, the LORD to whom they had agreed to live in submission, according to the terms of their covenant with Him. Further, it was to *be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the Lord, to make atonement for yourselves*. Notice that the phrase *to make atonement for yourselves* is used in both verses 15 and 16, emphasizing the fact that the *ransom* money was an offering by the LORD’s redeemed people to Him who preserved their lives.

Biblical Text:

¹¹ The Lord also spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² “When you take a census of the sons of Israel to number them, then each one of them shall give a ransom for himself to the Lord, when you number them, so that there will be no plague among them when you number them. ¹³ This is what everyone who is numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as a contribution to the Lord. ¹⁴ Everyone who is numbered, from twenty years old and over, shall give the contribution to the Lord. ¹⁵ The rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to the Lord to make atonement for yourselves. ¹⁶ You shall take the atonement money from the sons of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may

be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the Lord, to make atonement for yourselves.”