



Sacrifices in Leviticus (1-8) and its contextual relevance for the Christian community

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Received 18 Mar 2021; Accepted 24 Apr 2021; Published 19 May 2021

Abstract

The book of Leviticus is arguably one of the least read books of the Bible. Those who practice the discipline of reading through the bible in a year will testify that Leviticus is a difficult book to read. Even some preachers also avoid preaching from the book because they find it very challenging to understand and contextually apply it. However, in as much as reading the book of Leviticus is difficult, this paper argues that its message is as important as any other book of the Bible. More so, it is almost impossible to discuss sacrifices without referring to Leviticus because it presents a thorough discourse on sacrifices; it serves as a bedrock for such discussions. Upholding the fact that all scripture, including the portions that discussed sacrifices (Leviticus 1-8), is inspired by God and is useful for teaching and edifying the body of Christ (2 Timothy 3:16), this paper seeks to discover the relevance of the Levitical sacrifices for the Christian community. The paper argues that although the Levitical sacrifices cannot be applied directly to Christians and are no longer binding on them because of Jesus who offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for the justification of man, they can neither be disregarded as unimportant; all scripture is important. Therefore, believers must look for the principles behind these sacrifices and apply them contextually.

Keywords: sacrifice, leviticus, christian community

1. Introduction

Sacrifice is arguably one of the most used yet least understood words in the Christendom. The word is often used out of context. Most Christians and pastors alike use the word at their discretion without paying attention to its contextual usage and meaning. For example, quite a number of Pastors, especially those in the contemporary African community, have succeeded in equating sacrifices to the weekly Sunday church service offerings. In fact, some have proceeded to make their church members believe that sacrifices are as important in the contemporary Christian community as they were in the Old Testament period. And that Christians need to offer sacrifices to God if they want their sins to be forgiven and be blessed by God. This is in line with some scholars who advocate for a re-institutionalization of sacrifices (Ice, 2009). But the question is, is this Biblical view? Does the Bible employ Christians to offer sacrifices to God? If yes, then what is the place or significance of Jesus' sacrifice? If no, then what is relevance of sacrifice as recorded in Leviticus 1-8 to the contemporary Christian community?

To answer these questions, this paper undertook the task of discussing sacrifices from a contextual biblical point of view. The paper believes that a proper understanding of sacrifice, as used in scriptures and especially the book of Leviticus, is paramount to understanding its relevance to the contemporary Christian community. Hence, the paper highlighted the various sacrifices outline in Leviticus, their nature and their function. After which, it concluded with a discussion on the contextual relevance of Sacrifice to the contemporary Christian community.

2. The Book of Leviticus

The book of Leviticus is arguably one of the least read books of the Bible. Those who practice the discipline of reading through the bible will testify that Leviticus is a difficult book to read; it requires a lot of discipline and commitment for one to continue reading through it (Constable, 2015) ^[4]. This made the book to be nicknamed as "the Bermuda Triangle of the Bible because many Christians get lost here" (Constable, 2015, p.4) ^[4]. Noticeably, even some preachers avoid preaching from the book because they find it very challenging to understand and contextually apply it. North (1994) ^[8] noted this earlier and asserted:

The Book of Leviticus, more than any other biblical book, has kept readers from getting to the biblical books that follow it. Leviticus calls to mind the old Negro spiritual: "So high, you can't get over it; so low, you can't get under it; so wide you can't get around it." The problem is... It is a very difficult book. Therefore, lots of people quit reading. Some make it through the five types of sacrifice. Others actually get through the consanguinity laws. But not many people finish the book. Many are called, but few are chosen (p. xi).

In as much as reading the book of Leviticus is difficult, we cannot deny the fact that its message is as important as any other book of the Bible. For example, it is almost impossible to discuss sacrifices without referring to Leviticus. This does not in any way mean that the Leviticus is the only book neither is it the first that talks about sacrifices, rather, it is one of the books that presents a thorough discourse on sacrifices. It serves as a bedrock for such discussions. Therefore, it becomes germane for me to discuss Sacrifices from the book of Leviticus.

3. Sacrifices in Leviticus

The book of Leviticus discussed five types of sacrifice (chapters 1-8). Although some Biblical scholars tend to differ on the naming of these sacrifice, they, however, agree that on the numbering except for a few that insist on combining sin and guilt offering as one thereby reducing the number to four (see Rooker, 2000; Baker, 2002) ^[9, 11]. This paper upholds that there are five Levitical sacrifice namely:

A. Burnt offering (Leviticus 1:3-17; 6:8-13)

The offering is to be a male from the herd, a male from the flock, or a bird.

Nature

The burnt offering of a male from the herd or flock is to be presented at the entrance to the tent of meeting so that it will be accepted. The person offering the animal is to lay hands on it, as a symbol of transferring his/her sins to the animal, and then slaughter the animal at the Northside of the Alter so that Aaron's sons can take the blood and sprinkle it on the Alter. Once that is done, the person with the offering is to skin the animal and cut it into pieces (1:4-6, 11-12). The pieces of the animal are to be set ablaze by Aaron's sons; the fire must burn all night long. Then in the morning, the Priest is to put on his Linen clothes, together with the Linen undergarment, pick up the ashes of the animal and place it beside the Alter, change his clothing and then go ahead to dispose of the ashes in a ceremonially clean place, outside of the camp (6:8-13)

If the offering is a Bird, the priest shall bring it to the Altar, wring off the head and burn it on the Altar. The priest is to also drain the blood of the bird, remove its feathers and throw it to the east of the Alter, tear the bird by the wings, though not completely, and then place it on the Alter to be burnt (1: 14-17).

Function

The function of this sacrifice is not mentioned in this particular text. However, a topical study of the Burnt offering will lead you to other passages that highlight its functions. Some of the functions include: an expression of faith or fulfillment of vows (Psalm 51:16-17); alter concentration (Gen 8:20; Judges 6:26; 2 Sam 24:25); purification after childbirth (Lev 12).

B. Sin offering (Leviticus 4, 5, 6:24-30)

The sin offering is one of the sacrifices that have different requirements depending on the person involved. It is to be offered by anyone who sins unintentionally; the priest (4:3), the entire Israel community (4:13), a leader (4:22), and or a member of the community (4:27).

Nature

The nature of this sacrifice is similar to the burnt offering except that what is offered depends on the person who sinned. Also, depending on the person involved, a portion of the meat can be eaten by the priest (6:26).

Function

The basic function of this sacrifice is to obtain forgiveness of sin and cleansing. The phrase "...and he shall be forgiven" is repeated mentioned at the end of every sacrificial procedure (4:25, 31, 35; 5:10).

C. Guilt offering (Leviticus 5:14-6:7; 7:1-10)

Just like the sin offering, Guilt offering is also offered when a person sin unintentionally. The difference is that the guilt offering is vertically inclined; it involves sins that directly affect man's relationship with God (5:15-16; 17-19; 6:1-7). While sin offering is horizontally inclined; it affects the relationship between man and man (4:1-5:13).

Nature

The guilt offering is to be a ram or lamb that is without defect (5:15, 18; 6:6). The animal is to be slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on all sides of the Alter. The fat, the kidney is to be burnt to the Lord on the Alter while the rest of the meat is to be eaten in a holy place by the priest and any male from the priest's family (7:2-6).

Function

The function of the guilt offering, just like the sin offering, is to obtain forgiveness of sins (4:20, 26, 31, 35, 5:6, 10, 13, 18, 26).

D. Peace offering (Leviticus 3, 7:11-36)

The Peace offering is also called fellowship offering, depending on the Biblical translation. This is the only sacrifice where a male or female animal (from the herd, flock or goat) can be offered; of course, it has to be without defect or blemish (3:1).

Nature

The animal offered is to be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting and be slaughtered in the same place that the burnt offering animal is slaughtered (3:2; 7:2). The priest is to sprinkle the blood of the animal on the Alter and burn all the fat and the kidney of the animal. After that, the Priest is to wave the rest of the meat and eat it himself, and or the family of the person that brought the sacrifice (7:15-16).

Function

The peace or fellowship offering has three functions: first, it can function as a thanksgiving offering (7:11-15); second, it can function as a vow or freewill offering (7:16-18); lastly, it can function as an ordination offering (8:22-32). The offering symbolizes a peaceful relationship with God because sin has been atoned.

E. Grain offering (Leviticus 2, 6:14-23)

This is the only sacrificial offering that does not require an animal; it is purely an offering of grain. Just like the peace/fellowship offering, a part of this offering can be eaten by the priest after he has presented a portion to the Lord.

Nature

This offering can either be of fine flour (2:1), baked flour without yeast (2:4), or first fruits (2:14). When the offering is being brought, the Priest is to take a portion of it and offer on the Alter. The rest of the portion is to be eaten by Aaron's sons in a holy place (6:14-23)

Function

The main function of this offering is to accompany the burnt offering as an offering of thanksgiving to God.

4. The contextual relevance of Levitical sacrifices to the Christian community

The question that almost every Christian ask after reading the five sacrifices in Leviticus is, what is the importance of this to us? This question is very valid especially now that Christ has offered himself, once and for all, as the ultimate sacrifice for the justification of man. The writer of Hebrews asserted that those sacrifices were instituted as a temporary act awaiting the coming of Christ (Hebrews 8:13). Chiroma (2020) in one of his class sessions on Old Testament theology at Pan Africa Christian University, stated that the thesis of the book of Hebrews can be summarized to be: Judaism and its tenet, *including the five Levitical sacrifices* (emphasis added), are obsolete; Christ is the only way to God. The argument against Levitical sacrifice, that it is archaic, annulled and should be discarded by Christians, is sturdy. Indeed, the Levitical sacrifice cannot be practice by Christians, because of Jesus' sacrifice, but does that mean that it has no contextual relevance for the Christian community? Of course, the answer is no because all scripture, including Leviticus chapters 1-8, is inspired by God and is useful for teaching and edifying the body of Christ (2 Tim 3:16). This, however, does not imply that all scriptures must be applied directly. But what then do we do with scriptures that cannot be applied directly to Christians?

Fortunately, Chiroma (2015) ^[3] proposes a solution to such dilemma. In one of his articles *The Role of the Mosaic Covenant in its Historical Context and its Relevance for Today*, Chiroma was faced with the dilemma of relating the Mosaic Covenant to Christians. upholding that the Biblical covenant that was instituted between Yahweh and the Israelites cannot be contextually applied to Christians neither can it be disregarded because all scripture is inspired by God, Chiroma (2015) ^[3] proposed that the solution to such dilemma is to ask if the specific law, or in our case sacrifice, has been fulfilled by Christ or set aside by the Epistles. If the answer to this question is yes, which in our case is a "yes" because Jesus Christ has fulfilled all the Levitical sacrifices, Chiroma (2015) ^[3] then proposed that we search for principles behind this law (sacrifices) that can be contextually relevant and applicable. This means asking the question: what is the principle behind the Levitical sacrifices?

Interestingly, this question has been answered by the writer of Hebrew. As earlier stated, the major theme of the book Hebrew is that Judaism and its tenet, *including the five Levitical sacrifices*, are obsolete; Christ is the only way to God. This implies that the principle behind the institution of the Levitical

sacrifice is to avail a temporary means of relating to God and obtaining the forgiveness of sin pending the ultimate sacrifice by Jesus which will offer ultimate salvation from sin. Hence, it can be categorically stated that by virtue of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, God no longer require any sacrifice from anyone. To say that God still requires sacrifices from his people in order to forgive their sins and offer them salvation is not only heretical but blasphemous; a total misrepresentation of God. Unlike the African Traditional Religious gods who require their followers to offer them food and libation, the God of the Bible has offered himself, in the person of Jesus, as the sacrifice for the salvation of man.

The question that one might be tempted to ask is: since the Levitical sacrifices are no longer binding on Christians because Christ has fulfilled them, then why do we still have them in the Bible? Why not remove them from scripture? After all, both clergy and laity find it difficult to read and apply them. The answer to that question is: the Levitical sacrifices are still part of scripture not because Christians are supposed to read, obey, and apply them, but because, as part of all scripture that is inspired by God, they are useful to teach to Christians the value of Jesus' sacrifice.

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed sacrifices as highlighted in the book of Leviticus chapters 1-8. It argues that although Leviticus is not the only book that talk about sacrifice, it is impossible to deliberate on sacrifice without referring to Leviticus. Therefore, the paper focused its discussion on sacrifices from the book of Leviticus. Haven outlined the five Levitical sacrifice alongside their nature and functions, the paper delved into discussing the contextual relevance of these sacrifices to the Christian community.

Also, this paper resolved that the Levitical sacrifices are no longer binding on Christians today; they were fulfilled by Christ. Therefore, Christians are to look at and appreciate Christ's sacrifice. By what Christ did on the cross, the sacrificial system was annulled; the curtain was torn into two, and believers are not required to offer any sacrifice when they sin. Rather, they are only to rely on what Christ has done for the forgiveness of sins.

This implies that pastors, especially those in the contemporary African community that associate sacrifice to the weekly Sunday church service offering and insist that Christians must offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins, should refrain from doing such as that is unbiblical. Instead, they should focus on helping believers in Christ understand the significance of Jesus' sacrifice; it annulled the Levitical sacrifices and offers salvation.

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