

Animal Sacrifices in Israel

- Past and Future

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Though commanded by God, animal sacrifices in Israel could never remove spiritual guilt from the offerer. The book of Hebrews is very clear about that (Heb. 10:4, 11). But it is equally erroneous to say that the sacrifices were mere teaching symbols given by God to prepare the nation for Messiah and His infinite atonement. Such a view is contradicted by precise statements in Exodus and Leviticus. From God's perspective, this was surely a major purpose in the sacrificial system; but it could not have been their exclusive purpose from the perspective of Old Covenant Israelites.

The Scriptures tell us that something really did happen to the Israelite offerer when he came to the right altar with the appropriate sacrifice; and he was expected to know what would happen to him (cf. Lev. 1:4b: "that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf"). What happened was temporal, finite, external and legal – not eternal, infinite, internal and soteriological. Nevertheless, what happened was personally and immediately significant, not simply symbolic and/or prophetic.

Now what does all of this indicate with regard to animal sacrifices in the millennial temple for Israel under the New Covenant? It indicates that future sacrifices will have nothing to do with eternal salvation, which only comes through the true faith in God. It also indicates that future animal sacrifices will be "efficacious" and "expiatory" only in terms of the strict provision for ceremonial (and thus temporal) forgiveness within the theocracy of Israel. Such sacrifices, then, will not be primarily memorial (like the bread and the cup in church communion services), any more than sacrifices in the age of the Old Covenant were primarily prospective or prophetic in the understanding of the offerer.

Though the Kingdom Age will begin with only regenerated citizens (cf. Matt. 25:34), the vast majority of people born during the Kingdom Age will remain unbelievers (Rev. 20:7-9). Thus, millennial nations will increasingly need the protection from the immediate wrath of a holy God that animal sacrifices will provide in accordance with their divine design and function in the Mosaic Law. Ezekiel foresaw, by the Spirit of

God, that there will be "the sin offering, the grain offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offerings, to make atonement for the house of Israel" (Ezek. 45:17). And Jeremiah foresaw that "the Levitical priests shall never lack a man before Me to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to prepare sacrifices continually" (Jer. 33:18).

How can vital spiritual instruction be accomplished for citizens of the millennial Kingdom Age through a system of animal sacrifices? If it is theoretically possible (though sadly rare) for the church today to achieve a spiritual, symbolic and pedagogic balance in the use of bread and cup in the Eucharist, then it will be all the more possible for regenerated Israel to attain the divinely intended balance between form and content, lip and heart, hand and soul, within the structures of the New Covenant. It is not only possible, but prophetically certain, that millennial animal sacrifices will be used in a God-honoring way (cf. Ps. 51:15-19; Heb. 11:4) by a regenerated, chosen nation before the inauguration of the eternal state when animals will presumably no longer exist.

Before the heavens and the earth flee away from Him who sits upon the great white throne (Rev. 20:11), God will provide a final demonstration of the validity of animal sacrifices as an instructional and disciplinary instrument for Israel. The entire world will see the true purpose of this system. Of course, the system never has and never will function on the level of Calvary's cross, where infinite and eternal guilt was dealt with once and for all. But the system did accomplish, under God, some very important pedagogical and disciplinary purposes for Israel under the Old Covenant (Gal. 4:1-7). There is good reason to believe that it will yet again, and far more successfully from a pedagogical standpoint, function on the level of purely temporal "cleansing" and forgiveness (cf. Heb. 9:13) within the strict limits of the national theocracy of Israel during the 1,000 years of Christ's reign upon the earth in accordance with the terms of the New Covenant.

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