

## WHY SACRIFICES IN THE MILLENNIUM?

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### Views of Ezekiel 40-48

Obviously the title of this paper assumes that there will be actual sacrifices in the millennium in connection with an actual temple as described by Ezekiel. Such an assumption is presumably a minority viewpoint among biblical interpreters. Broadly speaking, interpreters understand Ezekiel 40-48 either non-literally and fulfilled ideally by the church or literally and fulfilled in the future millennial kingdom. Within these two broad categories exist some variations.

#### The Non-Literal View of Ezekiel 40-48

C.G. Howie attributes Ezekiel 40-48 to "the editor who also lived before the Zerubbabel-Joshua restoration of the temple."<sup>1</sup> Yet these chapters describe the future glory of God's people and God's land. When that will happen is left unspecified. F. Gardiner regards the prophecy as an "ideal one on every ground without looking for any literal and material fulfillment." Ezekiel, he says, wishes "to set forth the glory, the purity, and the beneficent influence of the Church of the future. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Anyone who consistently uses a normal, plain, historical-grammatical or literal hermeneutic will reject those interpretations out of hand. Too, anyone who has a sensible view of reason would, it seems, have to admit that not to take the many specific details in the chapters (Careful measurements, places, etc.) literally contravenes all reason.

#### A Combination View

A.R. Fausset, an ardent premillennialist, took a mediating stand between a completely non-literal and a consistently literal understanding of the matter. Concerning the temple he wrote on Ezekiel 40:-48: "There are things in it so improbable physically as to preclude a *purely* literal interpretation. The general truth seem to hold good that, as Israel served the nations for their rejection of Messiah, so shall they serve him in the person of Messiah when he shall acknowledge Messiah. . . . The ideal temple exhibits . . . *the essential character* of the worship of Messiah as it shall be when He shall exercise as it shall be when He shall exercise sway in Jerusalem among His own people, the Jews, and thence to the ends of the earth."<sup>3</sup> Though the writer believes in an earthly millennium, he does not see its temple as "purely literal."

Concerning sacrifices in relation to the temple and although he does not comment on every mention of sacrifices in those chapters nor opine what their purpose will be, Fausset evidently believed that they will be offered literally.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. G. Howie, "Ezekiel," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1962) 2:208.

<sup>2</sup> F. Gardiner, "Ezekiel," *A Bible Commentary for English Readers*, edited by Charles John Ellicott (London: Cassell and Co., n.d.), 5:316.

<sup>3</sup> A. R. Fausset, "The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel," *A Commentary Critical, Experimental and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, by the Rev. Robert Jamieson, Rev. A.R. Fausset, and the Rev. David Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 4:356.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:360-376.

### The Literal View

Whether supporters of a literal understanding of Ezekiel 40-48 agree or even discuss the purpose of sacrifices, they agree that the chapters are to be interpreted plainly or normally. That means that a temple will be built in the millennium according to the specifications in those chapters and that actual sacrifices will be offered.<sup>5</sup>

### Views as to the Purpose of Sacrifices

#### The Memorial View

As to the purpose of millennial sacrifices for those who understand that they will actually be offered, most consider them memorialize the work of Christ on the cross. This view is widely held by premillennialists including A.C. Gaebel, Charles Feinberg, J. Dwight Pentecost, Eric Sauer, and others. Since, it is argued, the sacrifices are not efficacious to remove sin in the millennium, to have them offered in no way contradicts the truth that Christ's offering was once for all (Heb. 7:27; 10:10). Too, just as the Lord's Supper today memorializes the death of Christ without diminishing the complete sufficiency of His death, so animal sacrifices in the millennium can be offered without slighting the finished work of Christ.

A contemporary statement of this memorial view is this: "These sacrifices do not take away sin in the millennial age any more than animal sacrifices did in Old Testament times. Their purpose seems to be that of being a vivid reminder of the Lord's death. As the Lord's Supper is a reminder of the death of Christ to the church today, it is probable that the animal sacrifices will uniquely memorialize Christ's horrible death on the cross. This will be a powerful teaching tool to people born in an age where righteousness and holiness prevail--in an age that is so free from the external effects of sin that its exceeding sinfulness is not clearly understood."<sup>6</sup>

However, compelling and non-conflicting (with the concept of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ) the memorial view may be, it is insufficient to explain the detail recorded concerning the sacrifices and the fact that it is said that they relate to "atonement" (43:20, 26; 45:15, 17, 20).

Opponents of the idea that any sacrifices will be offered in the millennium focus on how embarrassing such is for literalists, for it would mean the reestablishment of the Mosaic sacrifices and Aaronic priesthood which, according to the book of Hebrews, have ended.<sup>7</sup>

#### The Views Related to the Meanings of Kopher

(1) Understanding כפר to mean "cover" or "conceal." This meaning connects the word with an Arabic root that means to cover or conceal. The resultant meaning is that the Hebrew word means that sin was covered over and the deity was pacified by virtue of an atonement made. However, "the connection of the Arabic word is weak and the Hebrew root is not used to mean

<sup>5</sup> Charles H. Dyer, "Ezekiel," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, editors (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985) 1: 1303-4.

<sup>6</sup> Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), p. 283.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947), pp. 246-7.

‘cover.’<sup>8</sup>

(2) Understanding כפר to mean ransom or propitiation. Support for this view includes the fact that the word is used to refer to the anger of individuals and of God (Gen. 32:20; Prov. 16:14; Num. 16:41-50; 25:11-13) which anger is averted by payment of a ransom which satisfies (propitiates) the offended party. Also כפר is usually translated by ἱλεως in the Septuagint. Old Testament scholar Laird Harris supports this meaning. “It means ‘to atone by offering a substitute.’ The great majority of the usages concern the priestly ritual of sprinkling of the sacrificial blood thus ‘making an atonement’ for the worshipper. There are forty-nine instances of this usage in Leviticus alone and no other meaning is there witnessed. . . . The life of the sacrificial animal specifically symbolized by its blood was required in exchange for the life of the worshipper. . . . [Sacrifice of animals] was the symbolic expression of innocent life given for guilty life. This symbolism is further clarified by the action of the worshipper in placing his hands on the head of the sacrifice and confessing his sins over the animal (cf. Lev. 16:21; 1:4; 4:4, etc.) which was then killed or sent out as a scapegoat.”<sup>9</sup>

New Testament scholar Leon Morris after a lengthy examination of kopher concludes that to make atonement means “to avert punishment, especially the divine anger, by the payment of a kopher, a ransom, which may be of money or which may be of life. . . . The essence of the transaction is the provision of an acceptable substitute.”<sup>10</sup> Walter Kaiser concurs that the word means “to deliver or ransom someone by a substitute.”<sup>11</sup>

(3) The Erase/Wipe Away/Purge View. The preferred view of Jerry M. Hullinger who states that כפר comes from an Akkadian cognate which mean “to wipe off” or “to purify.”<sup>12</sup> He argues that since purging is not an action exercised on God, and a person is never the direct object of the kopher rite (but see Ezek. 16:63), and in three of the five occurrences of kopher in Ezek. 43:20, 26; 45:15, 17, 20 the object of atonement is inanimate (though in the other two [45: 15, 17] it is people), then the meaning of kopher-ing in the future temple concerns wiping away contamination of that temple brought about by unclean worshippers. He draws analogies from the pollution of the tabernacle (Numb. 19:13, 20), menstruation (Lev. 12:2,5, 7), contact with a corpse (Lev. 10:3-4), leprosy (Lev. 13-14).

Notice some additional considerations which tend to make Hullinger’s conclusion not airtight. The references to cleansing the altar of burnt offering (43:20,26) relate to the one-time initial consecration of that altar, not to continual cleansing. Atonement for the sanctuary was prescribed twice each year (45:18-20). Atonement for the people was done by the prince as their

<sup>8</sup> R. Laird Harris, “כפר,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, R. Laird Harris, editor (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:452-3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:453.

<sup>10</sup> Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 147-8.

<sup>11</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), p. 117.

<sup>12</sup> Jerry M. Hullinger, “The Problem of Animal Sacrifices in Ezekiel 40-48,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Vol. 152, No. 607, July-September 1995), pp. 279-89.

representative at the appointed feasts (45:17). So instead of understanding koper as only wiping away the contamination of the temple, it seems better to combine meanings and include both ideas of propitiation and purging (“covering” seems not well supported).

**Purposes of the Levitical Sacrificial System**

An excursion into the purposes of the Levitical system of sacrifices will provide considerable help in determining the purposes of sacrifices in the millennial kingdom.

One cannot escape the fact that (1) Levitical sacrifices did provide an atonement that apparently did not depend on the faith or spiritual condition of the offerer (Lev. 1:4; 4:20 and many other references). “. . . it seems very evident that the Mosaic sacrifices have a certain *real efficacy* ascribed to them in the Old Testament. . . . Nor is there a word said to indicate that this efficacy depended either on the inward dispositions of the worshippers, or on any prefigurative reference, whether understood or not, which their offerings may have had to the great sacrifice of the cross. So far as we can learn from the terms of the Mosaic statutes, the sacrifices seem to have been of unailing benefit in all cases in which they were punctually and exactly offered. Their efficacy, such as it was, belonged to them *ex opere operato*.”<sup>13</sup>

(2) At the same time the New Testament is unequivocal in declaring that “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4, cf. v. 11).

Suggestions as to reconciling these opposite statements include (1) differentiating between outward cleansing of the Old Testament and inward cleansing of the conscience in the New Testament; (2) understanding the Old Testament sacrifices to be prefigurative of the cross and thus to be effective only if offered in faith; (3) a partial efficacy in the Old Testament versus a full efficacy in the New; (4) an efficacy to restore the privileges of the offending person in relation to the commonwealth of Israel versus an efficacy to forgive the eternal consequences of sin.

This last view I believe is the correct one. In other words, in a theocracy every sin had a Godward facet as well as a governmental one. Provision had to be made to right the wrong committed against the government under which Israel lived. But a governmental offense would also be a sin against the head of the theocracy, the true God. Thus sin was both a governmental and a spiritual offense because of the nature of a theocracy. So the atonement made by the Levitical sacrifices would restore the sinner to his privileges and position in the theocracy including his theocratic relation to God. This would be true whether or not the Israelite was a believer whose sins were also eternally forgiven. All, believers and unbelievers, needed what I call “theocratic forgiveness” when they sinned. Such forgiveness would bring forgiveness of those theocratic offenses by the government which included its Head. To bring the prescribed offering in the prescribed way guaranteed theocratic forgiveness and restoration regardless of the spiritual condition of the offerer. The sacrifices when properly brought automatically made the person right with the law as the code of conduct under which he lived and with the Lawgiver in His position as Head of the theocracy but not in his role as Savior. To enter even into that relationship did require

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas J. Crawford, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture Respecting the Atonement* (first ed. 1871) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), p. 249.

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faith.

Oehler makes an intriguing observation about the rituals in the days of the captivity when the theocracy was in eclipse. He says: "It must moreover, be remembered how important the observance of these ritual observances was, especially during the captivity, as a *means of fencing the people* and protecting them against heathenism."<sup>14</sup>

In addition to theocratic atonement, the Levitical sacrifices also had a second purpose. They spoke the language of symbolism which gave them a prefigurative purpose. But how much prefiguring did they contain? Was there a Christological content or picture in the Old Testament sacrifices? Some say hardly any or even none. Others say that if the sacrifices were offered in faith they had for the offerer an eternal effect because he saw something beyond the ritual of the offering itself. Though the offerings themselves could not automatically bring spiritual salvation, if offered in faith they might because of what they prefigured. But still the question remains, largely unanswerable, What did the offerer understand about any prefiguring in the sacrifices? What we can understand because we have the New Testament revelation is another matter. Here are some things to consider.

(1) The law was a shadow of things to come (Heb. 10:1). But what could be seen in that shadow?

(2) Performing the works of the law could not save eternally (Rom. 3:20).

(3) In the regular repetition of offerings the one bringing an offering might have longed for (is that another way of saying he might have believed?) some complete dealing with sin. But whatever hope a worshiper may have had, he had no sense of completed cleansing simply because the repetition of the offerings forbade such a conclusion (Heb. 10:1-2).

(4) To acknowledge that an Israelite might have had some glimmer of a better provision than the sacrifices and have faith in that is one thing. But to say that that glimmer revealed Jesus Christ the Savior is an impossible leap. To accomplish that leap requires one to see more details about the Messiah than the Old Testament reveals.<sup>15</sup>

(5) But did not Moses see Christ and therefore had a clear prefiguring of Him (Heb. 11:36-27)? Yes, if Christ means Jesus Christ. But no, if, as is likely, the reference is to Moses himself as God's anointed (a Christ). In any case, even if Moses understood about the coming Christ, can we conclude that the average Israelite also did?

(6) David believed God would forgive his sin and knew that that forgiveness could not come from bringing sacrifices (Psa. 51).

(6) Paul calls the Old Testament days "times of ignorance" when compared to the New Testament revelation (Acts 17:30).

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<sup>14</sup> Gustav Griedrich Oehler, *Theology of The Old Testament* (N.Y.: Funk & Wagnalls, 1885, 3rd ed.), p. 453.

<sup>15</sup> J. Barton Payne, *An Outline of Hebrew History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), p. 222 where this covenant premillennialist wrote: "That, to satisfy God, God must die, that men might inherit God, to be with God, was incomprehensible under the Old Testament seminal knowledge of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the crucifixion followed by the resurrection."

(7) First Peter 1:10 also places limits on how much Old Testament prophets knew. They were unclear as to whom and to what period and circumstances the Spirit of Christ was pointing. Though they may have understood something about a coming Messiah and deliverer, they did not know who that person would be (and their confusion and uncertainty was demonstrated during our Lord's earthly ministry as recorded in John 1:19 and Matt. 11:3).

The question is not possible to answer conclusively.

A third purpose for the Levitical sacrifices was to provide a concrete way for the redeemed Israelite to show his obedience to and love for his God. One whose heart was rightly related to God certainly would not ignore or fail to obey the requirements of the sacrificial system. He would bring the required sacrifices willingly, gladly, out of love for God thereby demonstrating the change God had made in his life through faith. Willingly bringing sacrifices by the redeemed person in the Old Testament was an evidence of fruitbearing just as willing obedience on the part of the New Testament believer gives evidence of his or her love for the Lord.

For example, the peace offerings could, presumably, be brought ritualistically, or, as was intended, "as a thanksgiving in connection with a vow made to God (cf. Ps. 116:14) or as a freewill offering . . . [which] consisted of an act of homage and obedience to the Lord. . ."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore the book of Deuteronomy "teaches that all these laws, which can be so easily taken in a legalistic sense . . . are to be understood as the application and practice in particular concrete situations of the primary command of love. . . The law is a practical guide for the man who wishes to set God up as the supreme director of his whole being."<sup>17</sup> Later amid the seemingly total rebellion of the nation in the days of Malachi, there were some who feared the Lord (3:16-17) and who, presumably, did not cheat and cut corners in their sacrifices as many did (cf. 1:18).

To sum up: The Levitical sacrifices had three purposes: (1) to provide theocratic forgiveness; (2) to prefigure a future something/someone; and (3) to show one's love for and obedience to the true God.

### **Worship and Festivals in the Millennium**

To say that the millennial kingdom will be different from all other eras of human history is an understatement. Some of these differences include the following.

(1) Differences in worship in the kingdom. Kingdom worship will be highlighted by the personal presence of Christ in Jerusalem (Zech. 8:3, 22). Even though some will live persisting in unbelief, the knowledge of the Lord will be available to all (Isa. 11:9). Many but not all of Israel's festivals will be observed. Those mentioned are sabbath, new moon (Ezek. 45:17), booths (45:25), Passover and unleavened bread (45:21), and the daily morning sacrifice (46:13). In addition the sanctuary was to be cleansed on the first and seventh days of the first month (45:18,20). This shifts the principal atoning sacrifices from the seventh month to the first, as if to

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<sup>16</sup> R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL.; InterVarsity, 1980), p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 1:93-4. Also 2:372.

show people that atonement is the foundation of all worship and life.<sup>18</sup> Those festivals not mentioned are evening sacrifice, Pentecost, trumpets, and day of atonement. Why will these be omitted? Some suggest that they will be no longer needed since Israel's promises will be fulfilled. Since people in the millennium will have the New Testament available, they will certainly realize that the day of atonement is no longer necessary, and, perhaps, they will recognize the prefiguring of the church age bracketed by Pentecost (its beginning) and trumpets (its rapture) was completed before the millennium begins (prefigured by the feast of Booths). Others suggest that mentioning the first two feasts in Israel's holiday calendar (Passover and Unleavened bread) and the last one (Booths) is to be understood as also including the intervening ones.

### **The Purposes of Animal Sacrifices in the Millennium**

Clearly animal sacrifices will be offered in the millennium. Even if one totally spiritualizes away the sacrifices and offerings mentioned in Ezekiel 40-48, still other passages refer to them (Isa. 56:7; Jer. 33:18; Zech. 14:16-21; Mal. 3:3). So the use of sacrifices in the millennium will have to be accepted (whether or not we fully understand the reasons for them) or a number of passages will have to be deliteralized.

Essentially the same three purposes for animal sacrifices under the Mosaic law will be found in the millennial kingdom. Those three were: (1) theocratic forgiveness, (2) to point to the better sacrifice of Messiah, and (3) a way of showing fruit for the believer.

(1) The Scriptures clearly teach that certain offerings will be offered in the millennial kingdom by Levites. At our Lord's second coming He will purify "the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness" (Malachi 3:3). Earlier Jeremiah recorded the Lord's promise that "the Levitical priests shall never lack a man before Me to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to prepare sacrifices continually" (Jeremiah 33:18). Isaiah predicted that millennial blessings and offerings will be extended to include participation by Gentiles (Isaiah 56:7).

In Ezekiel 40-46 burnt offerings in the millennium are mentioned 19 times, grain offerings 15 times, peace offerings six times, and the sin offering 14 times. Failure to keep the Feast of Booths with its nearly 200 animal sacrifices during the eight days of its observance will bring drought or a plague on those who do not observe it (Zechariah 14:16-19). These many offerings will be appropriate under the future theocratic government in the millennium as they were under the previous Mosaic theocracy. King Jesus will be reigning visibly as Head of the theocracy so that not only will violations of His government be atoned for by offerings but the righteous functioning of that government will involve sacrifices. As Oehler said about the Mosaic sacrificial system, it also may well be said that the millennial sacrifices will serve as a kind of fence around the people who will live in that theocracy.

(2) A second purpose of the Mosaic sacrifices was to give some indication, however faint or clear, of the need for a coming Deliverer to care for the recurring sin problem. Usually premillennialists say that sacrifices in the millennium will serve as a memorial looking back on the

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<sup>18</sup> C.F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 430.

once for all sacrifice of Christ at Calvary. This is certainly reasonable. But why will not the purpose be more similar to what it was under the Law; i.e., to point to the Messiah not as coming in the future but as then reigning on His throne? In other words, the sacrifices will remind unbelievers of their need to deal with the eternal consequences of sin and point them to the One who paid for those sins and who is there present offering that salvation to them. In contrast to the theocracy over Israel in the Old Testament, the millennial theocracy will be worldwide and will include Gentiles as well as Jews (Isa. 56:7). We know, too, there will be unbelievers living during the millennium even to the close of the 1,000 years (Rev. 20: 8-9). Apparently they will have to give outward allegiance to the King or suffer consequences, but inwardly their hearts will be in rebellion to Him. In other words, they will be closet rebels! To those people the sacrifices should be a constant reminder that there is a way to have a right and eternal relationship to Christ. Sacrifices will be a remembrance to those who have accepted the Lord and a continual sermon to those who have not.

(3) A way of showing fruit for the believer. Just as under the Mosaic system those whose hearts were right with God brought their sacrifices as evidence of that relationship, so also in the millennial theocracy believers will do the same. All those who love the Lord and are His servants will show that love by their service and obedience to God's covenant (Isa. 56:6). In turn the Lord declares that their "burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar" (v. 7). Too, the Levites, purified by the Lord, will "present to the Lord offerings in righteousness" (Mal. 3:3).

C.F. Keil observes that the shift "of the chief atoning sacrifices from the seventh month, at the end of the religious year [Lev. 23:27], to the first month [Ezek. 45:18-20] indicates that, for the Israel of the new covenant, this eternally-availing atoning sacrifice would form the foundation for all its acts of worship and keeping of feasts, as well as for the whole course of its life [which] indicates that the people offering these sacrifices will bring forth more of the fruit of sanctification in good works upon the ground of the reconciliation which it has received."<sup>19</sup>

Just as in Israel of old and today in the church, presumably there will be those who will go through the motions of obedience by bringing sacrifices but whose hearts are either unrighteous or cold toward the Lord. But as then and now, there will be many who will obey out of love for the King and by that obedience will bear fruit to His glory.

Thus millennial sacrifices concern (1) payment, (2) proclamation, and (3) proof. Payment for sins committed against the government to effect theocratic forgiveness. Proclamation of the once-for-all death of Christ on the cross--a proclamation that will be frequent and clear, for the people will have available the presence of the Savior and the entire Bible to read. Proof of changed lives by those who will bring them out of love and a pure heart. These are all worthy purposes and in no way backward steps in the progressive revelation of the glory of God.

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<sup>19</sup> C.F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 429.