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Literal Sacrifices In The Millennium

by Thomas Ice

One of the most commonly presented problems by critics of premillennial literal interpretation is found in association with Ezekiel's temple vision (Ezekiel 40—48). These rivals argue that Ezekiel 43:13, 27; 45:15, 17, 20 refers to the sacrifices in a would be future Temple as literally making atonement. This is true! The critics believe this to be a blasphemous contradiction to the finished work of Christ as presented in Hebrews 10. In fact, the "Bible Answer Man"—Hank Hanegraaff—called me heretical on one of his daily call-in programs because I teach that God will restore literal sacrifices in a millennial Temple.¹

Are these "problems" basis enough to abandon a literal interpretation of the millennial Temple, sacrifices, and our view of future prophetic events all together, as our opponents would desire? What is it about a literal interpretation of millennial sacrifices that one would call another heretical for taking the Bible at face value? I don't think so.

Like any so-called "problem" arising in the mind of an antagonists there are answers and the solution to their objection lies in the very details they believe to be the source of difficulty. In the process of providing an explanation, note the following facts and observations about the Ezekiel passage:

- The purpose for a Temple throughout Scripture has been to establish a location upon earth—which is under the curse of sin—for the presence of God that reveals through its ritual God's great holiness. God's plan for Israel, His earthly people, includes a relation to them through a Temple. Currently the church is God's spiritual Temple made of living stones (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22), until the rapture. The millennium will return history to a focus upon Israel and will continue to be a time in which sin will be present upon the earth. Thus, God will include a new Temple, a new priesthood, a new Law, etc., at this future time because He will be present in Israel and still desires to teach that holiness is required to approach Him. This is contrasted with the fact that no Temple will exist in eternity (Revelation 21:22) because God and the Lamb are its temple and there will be no sin in heaven, thus no need for Temple ritual.
- The painstaking detail in Ezekiel 40—48 is similar to the instruction given to Moses for building of the Tabernacle and then to others for building the Solomonic Temple. Such detail is meaningless unless taken literally as were the Tabernacle and first two Temples. If the detail was intended to be symbolic, the symbols are never explained, as is usually the case with genuine biblical symbolism. Because no textual basis exists for a non-literal interpretation, those attempting such explanations become subjective in their many and various guesses about the meaning of the passage.
- It must be remembered that the Levitical sacrifices of the Mosaic system are said by the Bible to "make atonement" as well (for example, Leviticus 4:20, 26, 31, 35, etc.). If these sacrifices in the past actually atoned for the people's sins, which, of course, they did not, then they would be equally blasphemous in light of Christ's perfect sacrifice. Hebrews 10:4 tells us, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." Furthermore, there would have been no need for Christ's once and for all atoning sacrifice if these past acts did the job.
- The sacrifices of the millennial Temple will not be a return to the Mosaic Law, since that Law has forever been fulfilled and discontinued through Christ (Romans 6:14-15; 7:1-6; 1 Corinthians 9:20-21; 2 Corinthians 3:7-11; Galatians 4:1-7; 5:18; Ephesians 2—3; Hebrews 7:12; 8:6-7, 13; 10:1-14). Instead it will be a new Law, containing a mixture of Mosaic type new laws under the jurisdiction of the New Covenant (Hebrews 7:12). The millennial system will have Jesus the Messiah physically present instead of the

Shechinah glory presence in conjunction with the ark of the covenant; a new Law instead of the Mosaic Law; a new priestly order from the sons of Zadok (Ezekiel 40:46; 43:19; 48:11) instead of the Levites; a new Temple measuring one mile square (Ezekiel 40:48—41:26) instead of the much smaller Solomonic model.

- Millennial sacrifices are mentioned as a “matter of fact” by the major prophets of the Old Testament as future occurrences. At least four other prophets join Ezekiel in affirming a sacrificial system in a millennial Temple (Isaiah 56:7; 66:20-23; Jeremiah 33:18; Zechariah 14:16-21; Malachi 3:3-4). This further supports the literal interpretation of Ezekiel. Why would five of Israel's prophets mention these sacrifices if they will not take place?
- Many who take a literal interpretation of the Millennial Temple and sacrifices believe that one aspect of these acts will serve as a memorial to Christ's once-for-all atoning work at His first coming. Yet, critics believe this to be a flawed conclusion. Support for a future memorial aspect can be seen in the fact that our current observation of the Lord's Supper includes this aspect (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Under the Mosaic system—which looked ahead—many times various Temple sacrifices are specifically called “memorials” (Exodus 30:16; Leviticus 2:2, 9; 5:12; 6:15; 24:7; Numbers 5:15, 18, 26). Such terminology could in fact be the basis for our current church age understanding of remembering the Lord's death adopted by Paul. The Mosaic memorial aspect would clearly support viewing future Temple sacrifices in this way, as millennial believers look back upon Christ's sacrificial provision.
- Critics of future millennial sacrifices seem to assume that all sacrifices, past and future, always depict Christ's final sacrifice for sin. They do not! There were various purposes for sacrifice in the Bible. An overwhelming majority of sacrifices under the Mosaic system were for purification of the priests and objects used in various rites. This is why atonement can be said in the past to be effective, yet still need Christ's future sacrifice, because many of the sacrifices did atone ceremonially, cleansing participants and objects in Temple ritual. Just as we never finish the task of washing cloths, ceremonial cleansing was an ongoing need. The same is clearly the case in Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 43:20 and 26, the atonement is specifically directed at cleansing the altar in order to make it ritually fit for sacrifice. The only other use of atonement also refer to cleansing objects so that ritual purity may be maintained for proper function of further worship (Ezekiel 45:15, 17, 20).

Dr. Jerry Hullinger has worked through all of the related issues involved in an interpretation of the millennial sacrifices and tells us the following:

. . . a solution that maintains dispensational distinctives, deals honestly with the text of Ezekiel, and in no way demeans the work Christ did on the cross. This study suggests that animal sacrifices during the millennium will serve primarily to remove ceremonial uncleanness and prevent defilement from polluting the temple envisioned by Ezekiel. This will be necessary because the glorious presence of Yahweh will once again be dwelling on earth in the midst of a sinful and unclean people.

Because of God's promise to dwell on earth during the millennium (as stated in the New Covenant), it is necessary that He protect His presence through sacrifice . . . It should further be added that this sacrificial system will be a temporary one in that the millennium (with its partial population of unglorified humanity) will last only one thousand years. During the eternal state all inhabitants of the New Jerusalem will be glorified and will therefore not be a source of contagious impurities to defile the holiness of Yahweh.²

Since all the sacrifices of Ezekiel relate to purification of the priests for Temple service, they do not specifically depict or represent Christ's atoning sacrifice. The presence and purpose of sacrifices neither diminishes the finished work of Christ, nor violates the normal and "literal" interpretation of the prophetic passages. Nothing in Ezekiel 40—48 conflicts with the death of Christ or New Testament teaching at any point. The supposed contradictions between a literal understanding of Ezekiel and New Testament doctrine evaporate when examined specifically.

The literal interpretation of the Bible and Bible prophecy stands, especially when one considers the fact that the critics cannot tell us, based upon a textual interpretation, what Ezekiel does mean if not taken literally. Instead of becoming an embarrassing problem, the millennial sacrifices issue becomes an argument and demonstration for consistent literal interpretation of Bible prophecy by demonstrating that the details of the text can only be harmonized with the rest of biblical teaching by taking them to mean what they say.

Although there will be millennial sacrifices, the focus of all worship will remain on the person and work of the Savior. The millennial Temple and its ritual will serve as a daily reminder of fallen man's need before a Holy God and lessons about how this same God lovingly works to remove the obstacle of human sin for those who trust Him.

¹ Tape Recording of "The Bible Answer Man," broadcast of February 25, 1999. Christian Research Institute, Box 7000, Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688-7000.

² Jerry Hullinger, "The Problem of Animal Sacrifices in Ezekiel 40—48" *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July–September 1995, Vol. 152, No. 607), pp. 281, 289.