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WHY LITERAL SACRIFICES IN THE MILLENNIUM

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

A common objection to the consistent literal interpretation of Bible prophecy is found in Ezekiel's Temple vision (Ezek. 40—48). Opponents argue that if this is a literal, future Temple, then it will require a return to the sacrificial system that Christ made obsolete since the prophet speaks of "atonement" (*kiper*) in Ezekiel 43:13, 27; 45:15, 17, 20. This is true! Critics believe this to be a blasphemous contradiction to the finished work of Christ as presented in Hebrews 10. Hank Hanegraaff says that I have "exacerbated the problem by stating that without animal sacrifices in the Millennium, Yahweh's holiness would be defiled. That, for obvious reasons, is blasphemous." He further says that such a view constitutes a return "to Old Covenant sacrifices."[1]

"Is it heretical to believe that a Temple and sacrifices will once again exist," ask John Schmitt and Carl Laney? "Ezekiel himself believed it was a reality and the future home of Messiah. Then, it becomes not heresy to believe that a Temple and sacrifices will exist; rather, it is almost a heresy to not believe this, especially because it is a part of God's infallible word. The burden on us is to determine how it fits—not its reality."[1] At least four other prophets join Ezekiel in affirming a sacrificial system in a millennial Temple (Isa. 56:7; 66:20-23; Jer. 33:18; Zech. 14:16-21; Mal. 3:3-4), which supports a literal and thus futurist understanding of Ezekiel.

NEW COVENANT SACRIFICES

We do not believe that reinstituting sacrifices in a future dispensation will be a return to the Mosaic system of the Old Covenant. The Mosaic Law has forever been fulfilled and discontinued through Christ (Rom. 6:14-15; 7:1-6; 1 Cor. 9:20-21; 2 Cor. 3:7-11; Gal. 4:1-7; 5:18; Eph. 2—3; Heb. 7:12; 8:6-7, 13; 10:1-14). The millennium will be a time in which Israel's New Covenant will become the ruling jurisdiction (Deut. 29:4; 30:6; Isa. 59:20–21; 61:8–9; Jer. 31:31–40; 32:37–40; 50:4–5; Ezek. 11:19–20; 16:60–63; 34:25–26; 36:24–32; 37:21–28; Zech. 9:11; 12:10–14). Therefore, it will not be a time of returning to the old but of going forward to the new. "For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also" (Heb. 7:12).

The new millennial Law will contain a mixture of Mosaic-type laws with totally new non-Mosaic laws not found in the 613, under the jurisdiction of the New Covenant. Jesus the Messiah will be physically present instead of the Shechinah glory presence in conjunction with the ark of the covenant; a new priestly order from the sons of Zadok (Ezek. 40:46; 43:19; 48:11) instead of the Levites; a new Temple measuring one mile square (Ezek. 40:48—41:26) instead of the much smaller Solomonic model. Randall Price tells us:

> The previous section concerning the design of the altar of burnt offering (43:13-27) introduced the reinstitution of the sacrificial service, which continues in the subsequent chapters (44—46) with regulations for the Levitical priests and the various sacrifices to be offered for Israel's atonement. Although detailed instructions concerning the institution of the sacrificial system appear for the first time in these chapters, frequent references to the

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[1] John Schmitt and Carl Laney, *Messiah's Coming Temple: Ezekiel's Prophetic Vision of the Future Temple* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997), p. 181.

practice have been made since the beginning of the prophecy (40:38-43, 46-47; 41:22; 42:13-14). Moreover, these references are not incidental, but intrinsic to the entire presentation of Ezekiel's vision in chapters 40—48. For example, there is a statement concerning the sacrificial system in every chapter but one (chapter 47). These references include: "new moons and Sabbaths . . . all the appointed feasts" (Ezek. 44:24; 45:17; 46:3, 11-12), "daily offerings" (Ezek. 46:13-14), "burnt offerings, grain offerings, and the libations" (Ezek. 45:17; 46:2, 4, 11-15), "blood sacrifices" (Ezek. 43:20), an "altar" for burnt offering (Ezek. 40:47; 43:13-27), an "altar" for incense offering (Ezek. 41:22), "boiling places" to "boil the sacrifices of the people" (Ezek. 46:23-24); a "Zadokite" priesthood to "offer Me the fat and the blood" (Ezek. 40:46; 42:13-14: 43:19; 44:15-16; 48:11), a "Levitical" priesthood to "slaughter the burnt offering" (Ezek. 44:10-11; 48:22). Furthermore, the offerings are stated to be for "a sin offering" (Ezek. 43:22, 25; 44:24, 29) and to "make atonement" (Ezek. 43:20; 45:25). Since the sacrifices and sacrificial personnel are so prominent throughout these chapters, the treatment of the sacrifices cannot be avoided.[2]

WHY A TEMPLE AND SACRIFICES?

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 includes a relation to them through a Temple since He wants to dwell in the midst of His people. Currently the church is God's spiritual Temple made of living stones (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:19-22). The millennium will return history to a time when Israel will be God's mediatory people but will also 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 (Rev. 21:22) because God and the Lamb are the Temple since there will be no sin in heaven, thus no need for ritual cleansing.

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, Lev. 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 says, "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.

So what do both past and future sacrifices accomplish if they don't actually remove sin? These sacrifices provide ritual cleansing of the priests, sanctuary, and utensils. Only Christ's sacrifice on the cross actually removes one's sin. Jerry Hullinger provides a solution that:

> . . . 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.[3]

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. Many of the sacrifices under the Mosaic system were purification rituals. 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. In Ezekiel 43:20 and 26, the atonement is specifically directed at cleansing the altar in order to make it ritually clean. The other uses of atonement also refer to cleansing objects so that ritual purity may be maintained for proper worship (Ezek. 45:15, 17, 20).

A Memorial

Many who take a literal interpretation of these sacrifices also believe that they will serve as a memorial to Christ's once-for-all atoning work. 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 Cor. 11:23-26). Under the Mosaic system—which looked ahead—many times various Temple sacrifices are specifically called "memorials" (Ex. 30:16; Lev. 2:2, 9; 5:12; 6:15; 24:7; Num. 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 clearly supports viewing future Temple sacrifices in this way, as millennial believers look back upon Christ's sacrificial provision.

Conclusion

The presence and purpose of millennial sacrifices neither diminish the finished work of Christ, nor violates the literal interpretation of these 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 and harmonized. 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. Maranatha!

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[1] Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), pp. 268–69.
[2] Randall Price, *Unpublished Notes on The Prophecies of Ezekiel*, (2007), pp. 70–71.

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