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CHRIST'S ATONEMENT AND ANIMAL SACRIFICES IN ISRAEL*

JOHN C. WHITCOMB

The future function of the millennial temple (Ezekiel 40-48) has long been problematic for dispensationalists in view of the finished work of Christ. Light is shed on this problem by noting the original theocratic purpose of OT sacrifices. This purpose was functionally distinct from that of the redemptive work of Christ. Millennial sacrifices will not simply memorialize Christ's redemption but will primarily function in restoring theocratic harmony. The differences between the Old Covenant stipulations and those of Ezekiel 40-48 can be accounted for in terms of this solution.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

How does the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ relate to the animal sacrifices which God gave to Israel through Moses? What did the blood of these animals accomplish for believing and/or unbelieving Israelites during the days of the Old Covenant theocracy? How does that Old Covenant sacrificial system compare with the New Covenant system envisioned in Ezekiel 40-48 and other OT prophets, especially in the light of the NT book of Hebrews?

A wide difference of opinion still exists in this important aspect of biblical theology. It is the thesis of this study that the answers to these questions lie in the recognition that there are distinct functions in the plan of God for the blood of sacrificial animals and for the

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precious blood of Jesus Christ. This distinction is especially significant for understanding the reinstatement of animal sacrifices in the future millennial kingdom of Christ.

THE CHURCH AND THE MOSAIC COVENANT

The atoning work of Jesus Christ is infinite in value, and is therefore eternally sufficient and efficacious for those who put their trust in him. This truth is clearly and repeatedly taught in the NT and is therefore fundamental to the Christian faith. The book of Hebrews especially emphasizes the contrast between the substitutionary work of Christ and the blood of bulls and goats in the Mosaic/Levitical/Aaronic system of the Old Covenant. The following statements make this clear: "the Law made nothing perfect" (7:19); "both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshipper perfect in conscience" (9:9); "the Law . . . can never by the same sacrifices year by year . . . make perfect those who draw near" (10:1); "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (10:4); "[animal] sacrifices . . . can never take away sin" (10:11); "where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (10:18). Thus, the New Covenant, in which the NT Church has its soteriological foundations (Heb 8:6-13; cf. Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 12:24), is infinitely superior to the Old Covenant of Moses, which was indeed "only a shadow of the good things to come" (Heb 10:1).¹

Does this mean, then, that Israel, the chosen theocratic nation, with its unconditional Abrahamic Covenant guarantee of a land (Gen 12:1; 13:14-17; 15:18-21; Deut 30:5) and divine blessing (Gen 12:2-3) has been forever set aside nationally in favor of the Church?² This has

¹Cf. Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1972) 155-60.

²The Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional only in the sense that God's sovereign grace guaranteed the ultimate spiritual salvation of Israel as a nation and great spiritual blessings to the nations through Abraham's ultimate Seed. It did *not* guarantee the regeneration of all his physical descendants. "An unconditional covenant . . . may have blessings attached to that covenant that are conditioned upon the response of the recipient of the covenant . . . but these conditioned blessings do not change the unconditional character of that covenant" (J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964] 68). Cf. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeaux, 1953) 48-75. The Abrahamic/New Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant are not in contradiction with each other. God promised, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it" (Jer 31:33; Rom 2:25-29; 8:3-4; Heb 7:18-19). The reappearance of *some aspects* of the Mosaic ritual during the Millennium will not necessarily, therefore, be a contradiction to the dynamics of the New Covenant. This seems to harmonize with Jesus' statement in the Upper Room: "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say unto you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:15-16).

indeed been the conclusion of many Christian theologians from the days of the church fathers down to modern times. Israel as a national entity is seen as apostate and therefore broken off forever as a distinct nation in the program of God.

THE NEW COVENANT

However, the NT, including the book of Hebrews, does not teach that Israel has been forever set aside. It *does* teach the end of the Old Covenant given by God to Israel through Moses. Yet it does *not* reject the Abrahamic Covenant (which the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 further elaborates). During the period from the death of Christ and the Day of Pentecost to the destruction of the Temple and the Jewish sacrificial system by Roman armies in A.D. 70, Jewish Christians were strongly pressured by their "kinsmen according to the flesh" to abandon the distinctive freedoms they found in the Christian gospel and to turn to a supposedly Mosaic legalistic belief (cf. Acts 15; Galatians 3). It was to such Christian believers that the author of Hebrews emphasized the shadowy insufficiency and temporary nature of the Mosaic covenant. He was not addressing Old Covenant national Israel, as were Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but professing members of the true Church.³

The contrast in Hebrews, then, is not between the Church and Israel under the New Covenant, or between the spiritual sacrifices offered by the Church (Heb 13:15) and the animal sacrifices which Israel will someday offer under the New Covenant. It is rather between the shadowy, insufficient nature of the Old Covenant and the sufficient, permanent nature of the New Covenant.⁴ The Church participates soteriologically in the New Covenant which was originally revealed by God through Jeremiah and Ezekiel with reference to a repentant Israel in the coming Kingdom age (Jer 31:33-34; Ezek 11:19-20; 36:25-28). The sufficiency of the New Covenant is guaranteed in the spiritual regeneration of all its participants.⁵

ROMANS 11 AND ISRAEL'S NATIONAL REGENERATION

The Church was graciously placed into a New Covenant relationship with God, but it did not thereby replace national Israel. This is explained in Rom 11:11-32. During the present age, national/theocratic

³Cf. Kent, *Hebrews*, 158-59: "the author [of Hebrews] is writing to Christians when he mentions the new covenant. It is granted that they are Jewish Christians, but the fact remains that they are Christians. . . . There is one new covenant to be fulfilled eschatologically with Israel, but participated in soteriologically by the church today."

⁴"New Covenant" translates διαθήκης καινής in Heb 8:8; 9:15; and διαθήκης νέας in 1:24.

⁵Kent, *Hebrews*, 153.

Israel has indeed been "rejected" (11:15) and "broken off" (11:17-22) because of "transgression," "failure," and "unbelief" (11:11, 12, 23). But that is by no means the end of Israel as a nation, for "Israel did not stumble so as to fall" (11:11). Some day, in fact, it will experience divine "fulfillment" (11:12) and "acceptance" (11:15). Indeed, "God is able to graft them in again . . . if they do not continue in their unbelief" (11:23). This will, in a sense, be "easier" for God to accomplish for them as "natural branches" than it was for God to graft Gentiles in "contrary to nature" (11:24), for Israel will be grafted back into the "rich root" (11:17) of "their own olive tree" (11:24; cf. John 4:22, "salvation is from the Jews"). This refers to God's New Covenant provision for Israel which was revealed through Jeremiah and Ezekiel and rooted in the Abrahamic Covenant (cf. Rom 4:11-17, "the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all"). The fact that the church participates in the soteriological benefits of the Abrahamic and New Covenants (cf. Eph 2:12-13) is a major factor which demonstrates continuity between Israel and the Church. But it hardly demonstrates that the Church has supplanted Israel in God's program.⁶ Indeed, "the gifts and the calling of God" are "irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). Likewise, the Christian can be assured of his eternal salvation in Christ (cf. Rom 8:28-39; Phil 1:6) only because God keeps his covenant promises.

ISRAEL AND THE NEW COVENANT

The New Covenant, originally promised to Israel as a nation (Gen. 12:1-3; Jer 31:33-34), now provides the Church with the infinite and eternal benefits of the substitutionary blood of Christ. But what did the New Covenant originally involve? It involved God's provision for a new heart through the Holy Spirit (i.e., regeneration; cf. Ezek 36:26-27) for the entire nation of Israel; the restoration of this

⁶C. E. B. Cranfield (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975] 2. 448, for example, concludes that "it is only where the Church persists in refusing to learn this message [of Romans 9-11] . . . that it is unable to believe in God's mercy for still unbelieving Israel, and so entertains the ugly and unscriptural notion that God has cast off His people Israel and simply replaced it with the Christian Church. These three chapters emphatically forbid us to speak of the Church as having once and for all taken the place of the Jewish people." Then he adds in a footnote, "And I confess with shame to having also myself used in print on more than one occasion this language of the replacement of Israel by the Church." Cf. his more recent *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 215, 273. See also John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 2. 98; and Arnold A. Van Ruler, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 45, 55, 57, 75-98 (extensively quoted in Earl D. Radmacher, "The Current Status of Dispensationalism and Its Eschatology" in K. S. Kantzer and S. N. Gundry, eds., *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979] 172-74).

regenerated nation to its ancestral land (Ezek 36:28—previously guaranteed by the Abrahamic Covenant, and not annulled by the Mosaic Covenant [Gal 3:17]); and a dynamic, functioning theocracy of twelve tribes gathered around a great new city and temple (Ezekiel 40–48; cf. Joel 3:18; Dan 9:24; Hag 2:7, 9; and Zech 14:16–21). Indeed, eight centuries before the New Covenant was described in detail by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Moses, the human spokesman for the Old Covenant, foresaw the basic provision of the New Covenant, namely a national restoration of Israel to her promised land by God's sovereign grace through regeneration of the heart (Deut 30:1–14).

Remarkably, even the ultimate passing away of the Aaronic high priesthood for Israel was indicated at an early stage in the progress of revelation when God announced through David concerning his greater son, a non-Levite, "Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Psa 110:4; cf. Hebrews 7). When the New Covenant is fulfilled for Israel, therefore, her high priest will be none other than her Messiah, and not a descendant of Aaron. This is a fact of tremendous importance in the light of Ezekiel 40–48, which conspicuously omits any reference to a Zadokian *high* priest (cf. Ezek 40:46 which states that only the descendants of Zadok out of the descendants of Aaron would minister before Yahweh), and the book of Hebrews, which identifies Jesus Christ as the permanent High Priest of God's people.

A century before Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the prophet Isaiah also foresaw this New Covenant system, even though he did not use the technical term. In the deepening gloom of national apostasy under Ahaz and even godly king Hezekiah, the prince of writing prophets spoke of "an everlasting covenant" which God would make with Israel "according to the faithful mercies shown to David" (55:3; cf. 61:8). That this anticipated the New Covenant is confirmed by the fact that a national forgiveness of sin is included (59:20–21, cf. 27:9; Rom 11:26–27). Isaiah not only foresaw God's New Covenant with Israel, but also a temple in the holy land (2:2–3; 56:3; 60:13). Here animal sacrifices would be offered on its altar by Egyptians (19:21) and Arabians from Kedar and Nebaioth (60:7), through "priests and Levites" (66:21), so that "foreigners who join themselves to the Lord . . . even these I will bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar" (56:6–7; cf. 66:19–20).

To Hosea, Isaiah's contemporary prophet in the northern kingdom, the wonders of this great New Covenant were also revealed (Hos 2:14–23). Hosea implied that after "many days" during which the nation would be "without king or prince," animal "sacrifices" would be resumed "in the last days" (3:4–5).

Jeremiah lived to see the final collapse of the politically independent theocracy of Israel (609–586 B.C.). To him the expression “a new covenant” was first revealed. This New Covenant included the offering of animals upon the altar of a temple in the holy land. Looking back to the Davidic Covenant (which was one aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant), the God of Israel announced: “I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth. . . . David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel” (33:15, 17; cf. vv 21, 22, 26). Then he added these significant words: “and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man before me” (33:18; cf. vv 21, 22). Thus, Jeremiah, in stating the total demise of the temporary Old Covenant (31:32), and in anticipating the national regeneration provided in the permanent New Covenant (31:31–34; 32:38–40; 33:6–13; 50:5), included animal sacrifices offered by Levitical priests as permanent aspects of this New Covenant for national Israel.

Ezekiel was the third major prophet who spoke of Israel’s everlasting covenant of peace, designated in 16:60–63; 20:37; 34:25; 37:21–28; and described soteriologically in 11:19–20 and 36:25–28. Included in this covenant was provision for “My sanctuary in their midst forever” (37:26, 28). In amazing detail, this sanctuary or temple is described in chapters 40–48 with regard to (1) the precise dimensions and arrangements of its courts, gates, chambers and furnishings (40:5–43:27); (2) its officials, including the mortal prince (44:3; 45:7, 16, 22; 46:2–18) and the Levitical descendants of Zadok (who replaced Abiathar as David’s faithful high priest) who would serve as priests (40:46; 43:19; 44:10–31; 46:20–24; 48:11); (3) the different types and characteristics and purposes of its animal sacrifices (40:38–43; 42:13; 43:18–27; 45:15–25; 46:2–15; 46:20–24; cf. 20:40); and (4) the boundaries and dimensions of the tribal territories surrounding the city and the temple with its life-giving river (47:1–48:35).

Other prophets who spoke of the future temple were Joel (3:18), Micah (4:1–5), Daniel (9:24), and Haggai (2:7, 9). Zechariah foresaw the strict enforcement of the Feast of Tabernacles among all Gentile nations (14:16–19; cf. Ezek 45:25). Zechariah also anticipated, in connection with the fulfillment of the New Covenant (9:11; 13:1), that “all who sacrifice will come and take [every cooking pot in Jerusalem] and boil in them” (14:21).

THE CHURCH AND THE NEW COVENANT

How should Christian participants in the New Covenant view these prophetic utterances concerning a restoration of national Israel to its land, complete with temple, Zadokian priests, and animal sacrifices, especially in the light of the emphatic pronouncements of the book of Hebrews? Liberal and Neo-orthodox theologians dismiss

Ezekiel's temple vision as an apocalyptic dream,⁷ or a tentative plan for the second temple which the returning exiles never adopted.⁸ Most conservative commentators assume that the covenants of God with Israel are being fulfilled in the Church⁹ and/or refer somehow to the eternal state.¹⁰ Even some premillennialists, finding it difficult to reconcile animal sacrifices in the millennium with the book of Hebrews, conclude that Israel's new covenant will indeed eventuate in national conversion and divine blessing in Palestine for a thousand years, but without a temple, priests, and sacrifices.¹¹

Keenly sensitive to the tensions and problems involved in this theological controversy, the dispensationalist John F. Walvoord suggests that "the literalness of the future temple and its sacrificial system

⁷Cf. Moshe Greenberg, "The Design and Themes of Ezekiel's Program of Restoration," *Int* 38 (1984) 181-208; John W. Wevers, *Ezekiel (The New Century Bible Commentary)*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 207; and Jon Douglas Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40-48* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1976) 161-63. Surprisingly, this position is also advocated by John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale, 1969) 253.

⁸Among those who have held this view are Eichhorn, Dathe, Herder, Doederlein, and Hutzig. These are cited in Patrick Fairbairn, *An Exposition of Ezekiel* (Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace, reprint 1960) 433.

⁹Cf. Fairbairn, *Ezekiel*, 435: "from the Fathers downward this has been the prevailing view in the Christian Church." See also Andrew W. Blackwood, Jr., *Ezekiel: Prophecy of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965) 235, 270. Typical of Blackwood's dubious hermeneutics is his discussion of the centrality of the altar in Ezek 40:17: "Many Protestants today are carefully ignoring God's message to us through Ezekiel's placement of the altar. . . . Today in the beautiful new Roman Catholic churches that are being constructed the sacramental table is brought away from the wall; so that the congregation, insofar as it is physically possible, surrounds the table. Ezekiel certainly is telling us that church architecture should be an expression of theology" (pp. 240-41).

¹⁰Cf. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 205-6; H. L. Ellison, *Ezekiel: The Man and His Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 137-44; and C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprint n.d.) 9. 417. For a list of contrasts between Ezekiel 40-48 and Revelation 21-22, cf. Ralph Alexander, *Ezekiel* (Chicago: Moody, 1976) 130-32.

¹¹Cf. Increase Mather, *The Mystery of Israel's Salvation*, vol. 22 in *A Library of American Puritan Writings*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: AMS, 1983) 113-14; George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, reprint 1952) 3. 83-91; H. A. Ironside, *Ezekiel the Prophet* (New York: Loizeaux, 1949) 284-90; and J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960) 4. 32. Erich Sauer (*From Eternity to Eternity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954] 181) has provided a wholesome perspective on the basic hermeneutical issue: "Either the prophet himself was mistaken in his expectation of a coming temple service, and the prophecy in the sense in which he himself meant it will never be fulfilled; or God, in the time of the Messiah, will fulfill literally these prophecies of the temple according to their intended literal meaning. There is no other choice possible." For an excellent analysis of the current tensions, see David L. Turner, "The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues" in this issue of *GTJ*.

is not inseparable from the premillennial concept of the millennium and, though in keeping with the general principles of literal interpretation, is not the *sine qua non* of millennialism." He significantly concludes, however, that "the most thoroughgoing students of premillennialism who evince understanding of the relation of literal interpretation to premillennial doctrine usually embrace the concept of a literal temple and literal sacrifices."¹² Without doubt, the large majority of dispensational premillennialists do interpret the Zadokian priesthood and animal sacrifices of the millennial age literally. They also attempt to modify the supposed clash between the OT prophecies of the New Covenant and the book of Hebrews by viewing these animal sacrifices strictly as memorials of the death of Christ, like the Church eucharist of the bread and cup.¹³ Such an approach may be questioned, however.

The key to the entire problem may be found in answers to three questions. (1) What was the true function of animal sacrifices in the Old Covenant? (2) What is the significance of the fundamental differences between Ezekiel's picture of the New Covenant system of worship and the Old Covenant system of worship? (3) Would a worship system involving animal sacrifices necessarily represent a great step backward for New Covenant Israel during the Kingdom Age?

THE TRUE FUNCTION OF ANIMAL SACRIFICES

In answer to the first question, animal sacrifices could never remove spiritual guilt from the offerer. The book of Hebrews is very clear about that (10:4, 11). But it is equally erroneous to say that the sacrifices were mere teaching symbols given by God to Israel to prepare them for Messiah and his infinite atonement. Such a view is contradicted by precise statements in Exodus and Leviticus.¹⁴ From

¹²John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1959) 315; cf. p. 311.

¹³Cf. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 312. Progressive revelation requires that millennial believers (who will constitute a decreasing proportion of the world's population as the Kingdom age continues) will be reminded of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God when they behold the shedding of animal blood at the Temple altar. Cf. Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Prophet Ezekiel* (New York: Our Hope, 1918) 311-13. However, that will not be their *sole* purpose and function.

¹⁴Cf. John S. Feinberg, "Salvation in the Old Testament," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, John S. and Paul D. Feinberg, eds. (Chicago: Moody, 1981) 70. Cf. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) 127-31. Ryrie correctly concludes: "The basis of salvation is always the death of Christ; the means is always faith; the object is always God (though man's understanding of God before and after the incarnation is obviously different); but the content of faith depends on the particular revelation God was pleased to give at

God's perspective, this was surely a major purpose of animal sacrifices; 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. 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. When an Israelite “unwittingly failed” to observe a particular ordinance of the Mosaic Law (in the weakness of his sin nature [Num 15:22–29], not “defiantly,” in open rebellion against God himself [Num 15:30–36]),¹⁵ he was actually “forgiven” through an “atonement” (a ritual cleansing; cf. Heb 9:10, 13) made by the priest (Num 15:25–26).

But what was the precise nature of this “forgiveness” and this “atonement”? To say that it was exclusively a prophetic anticipation of Christ's atoning work does not do justice to the progress of revelation.¹⁶ There simply is no biblical evidence that the knowledge-content of OT saving faith always and necessarily included a crucified Messiah. However, in God's eternal purpose, the death of his son has always been and always will be the final basis of spiritual salvation (Rom 3:25–26). Saving faith before the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) involved a heart response to whatever special revelation of God was available at that time in history (cf. Romans 4; Galatians 3; Hebrews 11). Such Spirit-initiated faith produced a “circumcised heart” (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25; Ezek 44:7, 9). No one was ever spiritually regenerated by works, not even by fulfilling legally prescribed sacrifices, offerings and other Mosaic requirements.¹⁷

In the covenant at Sinai, God provided a highly complex and rigid structure for his “kingdom of priests.” Within that structure, national/theocratic transgressions would receive national/theocratic forgiveness when appropriate sacrifices were offered to God through legitimate priests at the tabernacle/temple altar. This “forgiveness”

a certain time. These are the distinctions which the dispensationalist recognizes, and they are distinctions necessitated by plain interpretation of revelation as it was given” (131).

¹⁵Cf. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 117–18.

¹⁶Cf. John S. Feinberg, “Salvation in the Old Testament,” 50, 51, 53, 55, 68. See also Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* 127–28: “Unquestionably the Old Testament does ascribe efficacy to the sacrifices. . . . The bringing of sacrifices restored the offender to his forfeited position as a Jewish worshipper and restored his theocratic relationship.”

¹⁷Feinberg, “Salvation in the Old Testament,” 61.

was promised regardless of the spiritual state of either the offerer or the priest. However, such sacrificial blood could never cleanse the conscience or save the soul (Heb 10:1-2), so God repeatedly sent prophets to call his people to love and obey their God from the heart. Apart from such genuine faith, all the ceremonially "kosher" animals in the whole world would avail nothing in the spiritual realm (Ps 50:7-15; Isa 1:12-20; Amos 4:4-5; 5:20-27; Hos 5:6; Mic 6:6-8; Jer 6:20; 7:21-23). It was not to be either faith or sacrifices; rather, it was to be both faith and sacrifices (cf. Ps 51:19).

It was just as true then as it is today: "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb 10:4). But it was also true then, under the Old Covenant, that "the blood of bulls and goats . . . sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh" (Heb 9:13). In the words of F. F. Bruce,

the blood of slaughtered animals under the old order *did possess a certain efficacy*, but it was an outward efficacy for the removal of ceremonial pollution. . . . They could restore [the worshipper] to formal communion with God and with his fellow-worshippers. . . . Just how the blood of sacrificed animals or the ashes of a red heifer effected a ceremonial cleansing our author does not explain; it was sufficient for him, and no doubt for his readers, that *the Old Testament ascribed this efficacy to them*.¹⁸

This was the unique tension within the theocracy of Israel that many Christian theologians apparently do not comprehend.

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 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. Thus, animal sacrifices during the coming Kingdom age will not be primarily memorial (like the eucharist 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.

¹⁸F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 201, 204. Italics added. In a personal communication, Professor John A. Sproule noted that "to argue from the present tense of ἀγιάζει in Hebrews 9:13 that such things (i.e., the blood of bulls and goats and the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer) would still sanctify defiled persons, as such ceremonies might still be carried out in Jewish sects at the time during which the author of Hebrews was writing, is unnecessary. The present tense (aspect) in New Testament Greek is much more flexible. The present tense (ἀγιάζει) could be used here simply for dramatic effect or vividness."

It is at this point that premillennial theologians exhibit differences. A. C. Gaebelein expressed, perhaps, the majority opinion when he wrote: "While the sacrifices Israel brought once had a prospective meaning, the sacrifices brought in the millennial Temple have a retrospective meaning."¹⁹ Ezekiel, however, does not say that animals will be offered for a "memorial" of Messiah's death. Rather, they will be for "atonement" (45:15, 17, 20; cf. 43:20, 26).

The Hebrew word used to describe the purpose of these sacrifices in Ezekiel 45:15, 17, and 20 is the *piel* form of *kaphar*. . . . But this is precisely the word used in the Pentateuchal description of the OT sacrifices to indicate their . . . expiatory purpose (cf. Lev 6:30; 8:15; 16:6, 11, 24, 30, 32, 33, 34; Num 5:8; 15:28; 29:5). If the sacrifices mentioned in Ezekiel are to be understood literally, they must be expiatory, not memorial offerings.²⁰

The distinction between ceremonial and spiritual atonement is by no means a minor one, for it is at the heart of the basic difference between the theocracy of Israel and the Church, the Body and Bride of Christ. It also provides a more consistent hermeneutical approach for dispensational premillennialism.

In his analysis of atonement in the OT, Richard E. Averbeck has shown that the Hebrew term כִּפַּר, used so frequently in Leviticus, does not mean "to cover," but rather "to appease, expiate, or cleanse."

Only Christ's sacrifice was of the kind that could form the basis for eternal and spiritual salvation (Heb 9:15). But this in no way refutes the . . . efficacy in the Old Testament atonement sacrifices. Those sacrifices had to do with the covenant relationship between God and the nation of Israel. Eternal or spiritual salvation was not the issue. Therefore, the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament and the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament were effective at their own respective [and totally different] levels.²¹

¹⁹Gaebelein, *The Prophet Ezekiel*, 312. For a listing and analysis of other 19th and early 20th century proponents of literal sacrifices in the Millennium (e.g., Adolph Saphir, William Kelly, Nathanael West, W. Haslam, Burlington B. Wade, John Fry, and H. Bonar), cf. John L. Mitchell, "The Question of Millennial Sacrifices," *BSac* 110:439 (1953) 248-67. George N. H. Peters (*The Theocratic Kingdom*, 3. 83, 88) also mentions D. N. Lord, Tyso, Shimeall, Begg, Baumgarten (in Herzog's *Encyclopedia*, "Ezekiel"), Auberlen, Hofman, and Volch.

²⁰Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 204, n. 16.

²¹Richard E. Averbeck, "An Exegetical Study of Leviticus 1:4 With a Discussion of the Nature of Old Testament Atonement," (unpublished M.Div. thesis; Winona Lake, IN: Grace Theological Seminary, 1977) 68. Personal communication with Averbeck in February, 1985, indicated several modifications in his thesis which are reflected in the present study. He prefers the term "quasi-physical" to describe OT sacrifice and ritual, his understanding being bound up in a thorough rethinking of the Levitical system as to its perspectives, details, and theological implications.

With respect to the millennium, Averbek concludes:

This accords well with the issue of the millennial sacrifices mentioned in Ezekiel. These rituals will not be memorials. They will atone . . . in the same efficacious way as the ones in Aaronic times. Why will this be necessary? Because God will again be dwelling, in His glory, among [mortal] men. . . . Christ did not shed His blood for the cleansing of any physical altar. Therefore, the special rite for the yearly cleansing of the millennial sanctuary will be required (Ezek 45:18-20). Regular sacrifices *will* be reinstated in the millennium.²²

In the light of these considerations, it is significant that Anthony A. Hoekema, a contemporary amillennial theologian, levels one of his heaviest criticisms of premillennialism at this very point:

Extremely significant is the note on page 888 of the *New Scofield Bible* which suggests the following as a possible interpretation of the sacrifices mentioned in these chapters of Ezekiel's prophecy: "The reference to sacrifices is not to be taken literally, in view of the putting away of such offerings, but is rather to be regarded as a presentation of the worship of redeemed Israel, in her own land and in the millennial temple, using the terms with which the Jews were familiar in Ezekiel's day." These words convey a far-reaching concession on the part of dispensationalists. If the sacrifices are not to be taken literally, why should we take the temple literally? It would seem that the dispensational principle of the literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy is here abandoned, and that a crucial foundation stone for the entire dispensational system has here been set aside!²³

Hoekema's objection is well taken. However, he assumes, along with many nondispensational theologians, that animal sacrifices in the millennium would involve a reinstatement of the Mosaic economy, just as if Christ had never died. Oswald T. Allis, another Reformed

²²*ibid.*, 68-69. In a personal communication, Averbek suggested that the "cleansing of the sanctuary" (= "you shall make atonement for the house") during the *first* week of the *first* month constitutes the millennial form of the ancient Day of Atonement. Moshe Greenberg ("The Design and Themes of Ezekiel's Program of Restoration," 197, n. 34) notes that "Medieval Hebrew commentators (e.g., Kimchi) identify these purgations [Ezek 45:18-20] with those of the altar consecration in 43:18-26 and both with a supposed future parallel to the week-long ceremonies inaugurating the desert tabernacle (Ex 40; cf. 29:35f). By thus interpreting our passage as a one-time ceremony, they obviated the contradiction that would have otherwise arisen between Ezekiel's annual Temple purgation that occurs in the spring (first month) and that of Lev 16 (the day of atonement) that occurs in the fall."

²³Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 204. The footnote cited by Hoekema in *The New Scofield Reference Bible* ([New York: Oxford, 1967] 888, n. 1) actually offers this view as the second of "two answers" to the animal sacrifice problem in Ezek 43:19 which "have been suggested." It is, nevertheless, a serious concession.

theologian, stated, for example: "Literally interpreted, this means the restoration of the Aaronic priesthood and of the Mosaic ritual of sacrifices essentially unchanged."²⁴ That this is not the case will be demonstrated next.

ISRAELITE WORSHIP UNDER THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS CONTRASTED

Ezekiel's picture of millennial worship and the Mosaic system which had been established nine hundred years earlier exhibit fundamental differences. OT scholars have often wrestled with the significance of these differences. Andrew W. Blackwood, Jr., does not hesitate to call them "discrepancies," hastening to assure his readers that

they concern matters that make no earthly difference to Christian faith, however they may have jarred the sensibilities of our Jewish forebears. There are twenty major discrepancies between Ezekiel and the Torah. Compare 46:6f. with Numbers 28:11, for example. Here are outright contradictions in the number of bullocks, lambs, and rams and the amount of flour to be used at the new moon offering ceremonies. . . . Long ago the rabbis were driven to say that Elijah, when he came, would explain away the difficulties. They said likewise that the entire prophecy would have been excluded from the canon were it not for the devoted labor of Rabbi Hanina ben Hezekiah, a scholar of the first century A.D., who must have written an extensive commentary on Ezekiel: "Three hundred barrels of oil were provided for him [for light], and he sat in an upper chamber where he reconciled all discrepancies" (Babylonian Talmud, *Menahoth* 45a).²⁵

It is the view of the present study that there are no discrepancies within Scripture, and that God's servants today do not have to wait until Elijah appears to discover a theological and hermeneutically satisfactory solution to this problem.

A century ago, Nathanael West listed some of the important differences between Old Covenant Israel and Millennial Israel in order to show how appropriate Ezekiel's structure will be for the Kingdom age.

If the *similarities* between [Ezekiel's] portrait of the "Many Days" of Israel in the Kingdom, and Israel's former Old Testament life, their ritual and laws, are remarkable, still more remarkable are the vast and important *differences* noted by Jews and Christians alike; differences so great as to make the [Jews], at one time, almost extrude the book

²⁴Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945) 246; cf. 245, 248.

²⁵Blackwood, *Ezekiel: Prophecy of Hope*, 21-22.

from the sacred canon as uninspired. It is plain that these differences imply an entire revolution from the old order of things, and intimate strongly the "vanishing away" of the Law, to make room for the "New Covenant" he has elsewhere, like Jeremiah, Hosea, Isaiah, proclaimed with such spiritual force.

There are *changes* in the dimensions of the Temple so that it is neither the temple of Solomon, nor that of Zerubbabel, nor that of Herod; changes in the measures of the outer court, the gates, the walls, the grounds, and the locality of the temple itself, raised on a high mountain, and even separate from the City. The Holy Places have hardly anything like the furniture that stood in the Tabernacle of Moses or the Temple of Solomon.

There are *subtractions* also. There is no Ark of the Covenant [cf. Jer. 3:16], no Pot of Manna, no Aaron's Rod to bud, no Tables of the Law, no Cherubim, no Mercy-Seat, no Golden Candlestick, no Shew-bread, no Veil, no unapproachable Holy of Holies where the High Priest alone might enter, nor is there any High-Priest. . . . The priesthood is confined to the sons of Zadok, and only for a special purpose. There is no evening sacrifice. . . . The social, moral, and civil prescriptions enforced by Moses with such emphasis are all wanting.²⁶

William Kelly was fascinated with the fact that there will be nothing in the Millennium answering to the Feast of Pentecost.

The omission seems to me to denote how completely it had been realized in the highest sense in the Church, which, as it were, had monopolized it. That heavenly body had come in between the true Passover, and before the verification of the Tabernacles, and had, so to speak, absorbed Pentecost to itself. . . . Who but God Himself could have thought of such an omission as that of Pentecost six centuries before it was realized so unexpectedly after the ascension?²⁷

In addition to all of this, C. F. Keil, writing from a postmillennial perspective, discovered ceremonial and ritual adaptations in Ezekiel's vision of Israel's future service for God that he believed to be far more appropriate than the Mosaic structure for a post-Calvary eschatological program.

According to Ezekiel's order of feasts and sacrifices, Israel was to begin every new year of its life with a great sin-offering on the first, seventh, and fourteenth days of the first month . . . before it renewed the covenant of grace with the Lord in the paschal meal . . . and throughout the year consecrate its life to the Lord in the daily burnt-offering, through

²⁶Nathanael West, *The Thousand Years in Both Testaments* (New York: Revell, 1880) 429-30.

²⁷William Kelly, *Lectures on the Second Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, 267-69. Quoted in John L. Mitchell, "The Question of Millennial Sacrifices," 260.

increased Sabbath-offerings . . . in order to live before Him a blameless, righteous, and happy life.²⁸

Keil also concluded that the shift "of the chief atoning sacrifices" from the seventh month, at the end of the religious year, to the first month (for Ezekiel completely eliminates the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement, leaving only the Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month)

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. It is in this that we find the Messianic feature of Ezekiel's order of sacrifices and feasts, by which it acquires a character more in accordance with the New Testament completion of the sacrificial service, which also presents itself to us in the other and still more deeply penetrating modifications of the Mosaic *torah* of sacrifice on the part of Ezekiel [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.²⁹

These are helpful insights, almost unique to a non-premillennial commentator, for understanding the religious structure of the millennial Kingdom age as well as the function of animal sacrifices during that time period. Unfortunately, Keil's theological position caused him to abandon the literal fulfillment of these prophecies and to denounce "M. Baumgarten, Auberlen, and other millenarians [who] express the opinion that this shadow-work will be restored after the eventual conversion of Israel to Christ, in support of which Baumgarten even appeals to the authority of the apostle to the Gentiles [Romans 11]."³⁰

MILLENNIAL SACRIFICES WILL NOT BE A BACKWARD STEP FOR ISRAEL

Consistent dispensationalism must teach the practice of animal sacrifices for a restored and regenerated Israel in the Millennium. But this raises the third major question: would such a worship system necessarily represent a great step backward for New Covenant Israel during the Kingdom age? Israel will indeed be under a New Covenant program, not the Old Covenant given to Moses which was not designed to guarantee salvation. Church communion services will no longer be observed, for they have been designed only to "proclaim the

²⁸C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint n.d.) 429.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 430.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 431.

Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). But after he comes, animal sacrifices within a New Covenant structure, endorsed (though not performed—cf. John 4:2 for a possible analogy with the church ordinance of water baptism) by the living Lamb of God, will constitute a gigantic step forward for Israel, not a reversion to "weak and beggarly elements" (Gal 4:9) which actually enslaved the nation because of its unregenerate misuse of the Law.

John A. Sproule has pointed to the principle of progressive revelation as a guarantee that millennial Israel will have the entire NT available to them, including the Book of Hebrews.³¹ The two witnesses (Revelation 11), the 144,000 (Revelation 7), and the Zadokian teaching priests functioning in the millennial temple (Ezekiel 40–48) will therefore know considerably more than John the Baptist, Apollos, the apostle Paul (who probably never read the book of Revelation), and even the apostle John. They will know about the full and finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. They will see no conflict between Ezekiel and Hebrews. They will realize that the omission of a high priest in Ezekiel 40–48 was not a mistake, just as it is now realized that the omission of a genealogy for Melchizedek in Genesis 14 was not a mistake (cf. Hebrews 7).³² Rather, they will recognize this omission as God's way of opening the door to the Melchizedekian High Priest of Ps 110:4 (cf. Ezek 21:26–27; Zech 6:13: "He will be a priest on His throne"), whose visible presence on earth during the coming Kingdom age will be the ultimate answer to this dilemma of the ages.

Believing Jews will experience regeneration and sanctification just as Christians do today, by the grace of God and through faith in the Lord Jesus. These future Jewish believers will not be glorified through seeing Jesus at his coming and in his Kingdom any more than the disciples in the Upper Room were glorified when they saw their resurrected Lord. However, the concept of progressive revelation guarantees that the New Covenant theocracy will begin with more knowledge than the Church did at Pentecost. Yet this theocracy will retain its distinctive Israelite characteristics—a promised land, a temple, appropriate animal sacrifices, and an earthly Zadokian priesthood (in that day visibly subordinate to Jesus Christ the Melchizedekian High Priest).

These sacrifices, illumined by a corporate understanding of the true significance of the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world, will be appreciated all the more for what they can and cannot accomplish for the offerer. For non-glorified millennial Israel and her Gentile proselytes throughout the world (e.g., Psalm 87; Isa 60:1–14;

³¹Personal communication, February, 1985.

³²Cf. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 136–38.

Zech 8:20–23), the continued presence of a sin nature will call for constant instruction and exhortation in revealed truth. Not even a perfect government will automatically solve this deep, universal problem. In distinction from the perfection of the eternal state as described in Revelation 21–22, Christ will “rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (Rev 12:5; 2:27; 19:15) with strict controls, especially in religious practices (cf. Zech 14:16–21). Even though outward submission to these religious forms will not necessarily demonstrate a regenerate heart (which has been true in every age of human history), it will guarantee protection from physical penalties and temporal judgments. Those who love the Christ will exhibit a genuine spirit of submission to his government. But those who do not truly love him will follow Satan (even as Judas Iscariot betrayed Christ after years of observing his perfect leadership) in global rebellion at the end of his righteous reign, and will be destroyed in cosmic fire (Rev 20:7–9).

CONCLUSION

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 (e.g., 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 quasi-physical and thus purely temporal cleansing and forgiveness (cf. Heb 9:13) within the strict limits of the national theocracy of Israel during the one thousand years of Christ's reign upon the earth in accordance with the terms of the New Covenant.