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# **SACRIFICE IN AFRICAN TRADITION AND IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>**

Cornelius Olowola

Comparing the concepts of sacrifice manifest in African tradition and in the Bible can be an instructive exercise. Whereas the sacrificial system of African traditional religion is similar in some ways to that practised by Israel in the Old Testament, there are also important differences. And the approach of the New Testament to sacrifice stands in sharp contrast to the approach of African tradition, and supersedes that of the Old Testament.

## **Comparisons between African and Israelite Sacrifice**

In comparing attitudes towards sacrifice evident in ancient Israel and in traditional Africa, we may first notice that both Israelites and Africans could look upon sacrifices as a means of obtaining favour. If engaging upon some enterprise such as a war or a hunting expedition, it was felt wise to sacrifice before the undertaking in order to secure assistance, and to sacrifice after the undertaking in order to express thanks. Among both peoples could be found a hope that by giving gifts the deity could be induced to render in return more than they had given.

Nevertheless, whatever some Israelites may have thought about sacrifice, the prophets of the Old Testament consistently pointed out that Israel did not receive blessings because of multitudinous sacrifices. According to Old Testament teaching, those who substituted sacrifice for genuine obedience to God were odious to Him. Only as the people obeyed the laws of God, so that their sacrifices became an outgrowth of their obedience, would God abundantly bless them (Mal 3:10).

Both Israelites and traditional Africans also looked upon sacrifice as a means of fellowship and communion. As Idowu has stated: "the offerings are means of communion between the orisa [traditional divinity of the Yoruba] and the worshippers who are his children, and consequently a means of fellowship among the children themselves."<sup>2</sup> The African meal and drink offering has similarities with Israel's Passover, which was a meal of communion and fellowship between God and Israel. Oesterley notes that "both in original and later times the Passover was a communion-sacrifice."<sup>3</sup>

Many Africans believe that the spirit of the departed continues to abide for a certain period either in or near the body it has just left. Food and drink are offered to the departed spirit either for the purpose of communion or to prevent harm from the powerful spirit of the departed. It appears that some Israelites may have had a similar notion. Deuteronomy 26:14 gives the response of a godly Israelite to Yahweh, "I have not eaten any of the sacred portion while I was in mourning, nor have I removed any of it while I was unclean, nor have I offered any of it to the dead." The statement implies that there were some Israelites who sacrificed to the dead, but that the true follower of Yahweh certainly did not, for the statement continues, "I have obeyed the Lord my God; I have done everything you commanded me."

Blood sacrifice has two distinct features in African tradition. It creates a new bond among those who participate in the rite and, where deities or ancestors are worshipped, it is believed that the blood revitalises the ones to whom the offering is made. Sawyerr writes, "Since blood is a gift, which is a vehicle of the life offered to another, it not only revives the life of the recipients, but it also gives new life to the donors."<sup>4</sup> This must be seen as an important difference between African and Old Testament sacrifices. Biblical sacrifices were never a means of revitalising God or man. Yahweh forbade the Israelites to drink blood (e.g. Lev 3:17), whereas African priests and people participate in drinking blood. It could be that some Israelites had the idea, taken from surrounding religion, that Yahweh drank the blood of the sacrifice, but the Psalmist directly repudiates this idea about God. "Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?" (Psalm 50:13). To this rhetorical question the implicit answer is that such a thing is unthinkable. The act of pouring out the blood at the foot of the altar or sprinkling the altar with it symbolised rather than the victim's life was given to Yahweh.

As to the material content of the sacrifice, both ancient Israelites and traditional Africans utilised animals and food in their sacrificial offerings. But whereas Africans sometimes engaged in human sacrifice, and this was widely practised in the ancient world, Israelites were forbidden to do so (Lev 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut 12:31; 18:10).

The major distinction between African and Old Testament sacrifice, of course, concerns the one to whom the sacrifice is offered. Unlike African sacrifices, Old Testament sacrifices were offered directly to Yahweh and only to Yahweh. The Bible is very clear that any other practice has always stood under God's condemnation.

You shall have no other gods besides me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them (Exodus 20:3-4).

### **Sacrifice in the New Testament**

The New Testament takes the whole matter of sacrifice much further. The New Testament teaching on sacrifice is that Christ, the Son of God, has been made the final sacrifice for sin, once for all. Any further sacrifice, whether to spirits or even to God himself, is therefore to be eliminated.

The New Testament clearly teaches that the Old Testament sacrificial system was only a foreshadow of the complete and perfect sacrifice which Christ made on the cross once for all. The Old Testament sacrifices pointed toward the true Sacrifice, but they were inadequate in themselves.

The law is only a shadow of good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Heb 10:1-4).

African traditional sacrifices as well are inadequate and done away with, and have no place in the new times that God has given us in Christ.

It is true that many professing Christians in Africa still offer sacrifices of different kinds to the spirits and ancestors. The simple explanation for this is that they are not deeply converted to Christianity, that they have neither understood nor appropriated what Christ has done on their behalf in his sacrificial death. They have yet to realise the full implications of this for their lives. Let us therefore take time to review these great implications of the sacrifice of Christ.

#### *(1) Christ's sacrifice atones for sin.*

African sacrifices might be able to remove ceremonial pollution, like the breaking of taboos, but they are unable to remove the guilt of sin. They cannot provide inward cleansing. But according to the Bible, the blood of Christ powerfully atones for sin.

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God (Heb 9:13,14).

Why should Christ's blood have such power? First of all because, as the passage states, Christ offered himself. He chose to sacrifice himself. His sacrifice was rational, voluntary and spontaneous. "It is not the slaughter of an unconscious, reluctant victim but an intelligent act of the highest spiritual obedience towards God (Phil 2:8)" states Hewitt.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, his blood was powerful because, as the passage states, Christ's offering was an unblemished offering. Both the African and the Levitical offerings may have been spotless outwardly, without external deformity. But only the offering of Christ was spotless throughout, not only outwardly but also inwardly. Christ can atone for sin because he himself was without sin.

(2) *Christ's sacrifice is substitutionary.*

One purpose of African sacrifice is to offer an animal (or sometimes a human being) to take the place of another individual or a community. Hence, when a child is sick, a chicken or goat is killed, dressed with oil, and buried. The idea is that the victim has taken the place of the child, so that the child will not be killed by the disease. But in the sacrifice of Christ, the African is offered the perfect, complete substitution for those evils in his life far deeper than any physical disease. Christ takes those evils on Himself in our place, for us, and on our behalf. "For the Son of Man came not to be ministered to, but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45).

(3) *Christ's sacrifice made Him mediator of a new covenant.*

The idea of a covenant is not foreign to traditional Africa. Covenants were made between two ethnic groups that they would not wage war against each other. This covenant was usually ratified with shedding of blood. There were covenants between individuals by which the thumb of each party was cut and each sucked the blood of the other. These acts established strong covenants in African religion and society. The Bible teaches that Christ's sacrificial death made him the Mediator of a new covenant, a new agreement between God and man, including the African.

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. . . . For a covenant is in force only when somebody has died (Heb 9:15-17).

As the passage states, the new covenant in Christ brings two benefits to those who accept Christ as their mediator with God. On the one hand they receive release and redemption from their sins, and on the other hand they receive the eternal inheritance which God has promised. Why then should African Christians continue with traditional sacrifices? These sacrifices involved covenants repeatedly made and broken, between man and man, and between

men and spirits. But through the mediatorial death of Christ the African Christian has been granted once for all through an eternal covenant both complete redemption and also God's promised inheritance.

*(4) Christ's sacrifice destroys the power of the evil one.*

It should be admitted that evil powers do exist, and that it is often through fear that Africans offer sacrifices to appease such powers. But Christ in his death on the cross has not only atoned for sin, but he has also destroyed the power of the evil one over us.

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb 2:14-15).

Since Christ in his sacrificial death has overcome evil spiritual powers, the follower of Christ is delivered from the present tyranny of such powers. There is no need for African Christians to sacrifice anything to appease evil spirits; they need only to appropriate for themselves the sacrifice of Christ in order to experience freedom from the evil one.

*(5) Christ's sacrifice reconciles man to God.*

African sacrifices are offered in part to appease the anger of the spirits. For example, if lightning strikes a house, a sacrifice is offered to the god of thunder to appease him. But man's problem is much deeper than such difficulties. Through his disobedience to God, man has become sinful. He has much more to be troubled about than appeasing mere spirits. Though he has known about God, he has not worshipped Him, but instead has worshipped created beings. This is as true of the African traditionalist as of any other peoples in the world. They have broken fellowship with their Creator. Instead of serving Him, they have chosen to serve spirits which are creatures, thus making themselves the enemies of God.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God made it plain to them. . . , so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. . . . They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator (Rom 1:18-20, 25).

Sacrifice to the spirits will not relieve man of God's just wrath. It is God with whom the African traditionalist and the African Christian must be reconciled, and for that problem traditional sacrifices will avail nothing.

But the good news of the gospel is that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). God himself, through the sacrifice of Christ, has opened the way for reconciliation with Himself:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18-21).

That indeed is the challenge of the Bible both to African traditionalists, and to any African Christians who have yet to take to themselves all that God has offered to them in the sacrifice of Christ. Christ's sacrifice is more than enough for all their needs.

Let me conclude with an abbreviated transcription of the early Yoruba Christian hymn, "Jesu Olugbala mo f'ori fun". The hymn is based on the Yoruba saying: "I give my head to—", indicating the particular deity worshipped by the speaker. The hymn refers by name to the various traditional deities of the Yoruba. These early Yoruba Christians obviously understood something vital concerning the significance of Christ within their African context. This hymn is in fact their prayer—and a prayer still very relevant for those in the African context today who likewise wish to appropriate the sacrifice of Christ for themselves.

Jesus Saviour, I give my head to you.  
Oh let me not perish, I pray

He was very kind to me.  
He came to earth for my sake.  
He suffered for my sake.  
He died for my sake.  
He made propitiation for me.  
He is interceding for me.

Jesus Saviour, I give my head to you.  
Oh let me not perish, I pray.

Shango, Shango cannot save us.  
Oya, Oya has no power.

Obatala did not create us.  
Yemaja cannot give birth.  
Every orisa is deaf.  
Irunmale cannot save us.

God is ever kind.  
He created us and He saves us.  
Come let us serve God.  
Cast away your orisas.

Jesus Saviour, I give my head to you,  
Oh let me not perish, I pray.<sup>6</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Taken from the book by Dr Cornelius Olowola, *African Traditional Religion and the Christian Faith*, to be published shortly.

<sup>2</sup>E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962) 121.

<sup>3</sup>W. O. E. Oesterley, *Sacrifice in Ancient Israel* (London: Hodder, 1937) 106.

<sup>4</sup>H. Sawyerr, "Sacrifice," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. by K. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth, 1969) 77.

<sup>5</sup>T. Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 148.

<sup>6</sup>Adapted from *IWE ORIN MIMO FUN IJO ENIA OLORUN NI ILE YORUBA* (CSS Bookshops, 1978) 545-547.