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Theological Significance of Levitical Worship in Contemporary Christianity

Webuin Rudolf Banglis¹

Abstract

Old Testament worship in general and Levitical worship in particular pose a challenge for contemporary Christians. The ritual procedures in the book of Leviticus are complex, ancient, and even meaningless to the modern mind. The book of Leviticus is a testament to the meticulous instructions that governs the Israelites patterns of worship. The question is, “Of what importance are the detailed description of sacrificial offerings, purity laws, and priestly sacrificial representative/mediatory duties, which are somewhat irrelevant and daunting in an age of ultra-emphasis on spirit and truth worship?” In other words, what does the contemporary Christian stand to gain from a study of the sacrificial system of worship enshrined in Leviticus owing to its elaborate and alien ritual practices in the age that promotes Christ-centered interpretation of the Old Testament sacrifices and offerings that override any serious focus on or appreciation of the rituals themselves? A critical study of the priestly ritual system in Leviticus, including the sacrificial offerings, purity laws and priestly duties, reveals a profound theological tapestry woven into the fabric of Levitical worship. The findings reveal that the role of the priesthood foreshadows the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the perfect High Priest. Also, Levitical worship portrays an enriching symbolism of the holiness of God, the sinfulness and inadequacy of man’s effort for personal salvation. It presents a God that needs to be hallowed in holiness and righteousness for man’s spiritual transformation.

Keywords: Contemporary Christianity, Levitical worship, theological significance

Résumé

Une compréhension du culte de l’Ancien Testament en général et du culte Lévitique en particulier pose un sérieux problème au chrétien contemporain. Cela est dû aux procédures rituelles du livre de Lévitique qui sont non seulement complexes, mais aussi anciennes, barbares et même dénuées de sens pour l’esprit moderne. Le livre de Lévitique, en effet, témoigne des instructions et des règlements méticuleux régissant les pratiques cultuelles des Israélites. La question est donc : « quelle est l’importance de la description détaillée des offrandes sacrificielles, des lois de pureté et des devoirs sacrificiels de représentation/médiation des prêtres, qui sont quelque peu hors de propos et intimidants à une époque où l’accent est mis sur le culte de l’esprit et de la vérité ? En d’autres termes, qu’est-ce que le chrétien contemporain a à gagner d’une étude du système de culte sacrificiel inscrit dans le Livre de Lévitique en raison de ses pratiques rituelles élaborées et étrangères à une époque qui promeut une interprétation des sacrifices et des offrandes de l’Ancien Testament centrée sur le Christ qui l’emportent sur une attention sérieuse sur notre appréciation des rituels eux-mêmes ? Une étude critique du système rituel sacerdotal de Lévitique, y compris les offrandes sacrificielles, les lois de pureté et les devoirs sacerdotaux, révèle une profonde tapisserie théologique tissée dans le tissu du culte lévitique. Cette étude démontre que le rôle du sacerdoce préfigure le sacerdoce de Jésus-Christ, le parfait Souverain Sacrificateur. Enfin, le culte lévitique dépeint un symbolisme enrichissant de la sainteté de Dieu, du caractère pécheur et de l’insuffisance

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des efforts de l'homme pour son salut personnel. Le culte lévitique présente un Dieu qui doit être vénéré dans la sainteté et la justice pour la transformation spirituelle de l'homme.

Mots clés : Signification théologique, culte Lévitique et Chrétien contemporain

Introduction

Contemporary Christians are often caught in the web of worship as outlined in the book of Leviticus, because of its elaborate rituals and challenging symbolism. At the heart of Old Testament (OT) worship, Levitical worship is essentially physical and sacrificial. Andrew V. Sneider submits that “sacrifice has always been fundamental as a basis for true worship. The book of Leviticus devotes itself to explaining how sinful Israelites, through sacrifices, could make themselves pure in approaching a holy God in their worship. Four of the five offerings addressed this – the whole burnt offering, the grain offering, the peace offering, and the sin offering – had the purpose of dealing with sin and with guilt.”² The rituals in Leviticus dealt with the people’s sin and guilt, thereby securing effective and meaningful worship in the Old Testament. In the sacrificial system of worship, the role of the Levites was outstanding. In the tapestry of OT worship practices, the sacred duties of the Levites stand out as a profound expression of devotion and reverence. Levitical worship, rooted in historical tradition and imbued with rich symbolism, carries a significant theological weight that transcends time and cultural contexts. This paper delves into the depths of Levitical worship to unravel its theological significance, shedding light on the intricate intersections of faith, ritual, and belief that continue to shape our understanding of spirituality today. This thesis is founded upon the fact that worship in Leviticus should be the foundation of Christian worship in contemporary times. Understanding the symbolism and the essence of Levitical worship could be a good trigger for effective Christian worship or worship in spirit and truth. Before delving into the world of sacrificial worship, it will be necessary to define Levitical worship and examine the materials and components of Levitical worship for proper comprehension of the concept at hand.

Conceptual Clarification

One of the key terminologies in the subject under discussion is Levitical worship. Levitical worship is made up of two keywords, namely Levitical and worship. These words must be defined separately and collectively to better understand the subject.

Worship

Dani D. submits that six significant verbs and five notable nouns found in the Old Testament assist readers in understanding worship. The original word used for worship in Hebrew is שָׁחָה whose pointing can change depending on the stem. It is transliterated *shachah*, with the qal perfect pointing, which means ‘he bows down, he bends down’. When used in the *hithpaal* stem, it means “he prostrated himself”. Prostration was quite common as an act of submission before a superior in the OT (Gen. 18:2; 23:7, 12; Gen. 19:1, Num.22:31, Gen. 17:3; 24:26; Exod.4:31; 24:1; 1Sam.1:3). The second verb is עָבַד *avad*, which means “he served.” It comes from an Aramaic word that means “worship, obey (God).”³ The third verb is יָרָא *yare*. It should be understood more as “to fear, to reverence or revere.” It speaks of the fear, awe, or reverence the Israelites felt toward God because he has the authority to deliver the righteous and judge

² Andrew V. Sneider, *Worthy is the Lamb that was Slain: Penal Substitution and Christian Worship*. The Master’s Seminary Journal Fall 2009, 215-230, 1

³ Dani D. *Worship in the Old Testament: Reliance, Reverence, Response, Reference, Relevance....* See *Theology of Christian Worship* pp. 25-44. It should be noted that the proper name for *avad* is *eved* which is translated in certain Old Testament as constituted allegiance to God by doing what God desired (See Eric Benjamin Dixon). Proper citation would help your audience, please.

the wicked as seen in Isaiah 43:1 and Joel 2:31, respectively. The fourth word is שָׂרַת transliterated *sheret* from *sharat* meaning ministering or to minister. It is a higher level of service from ‘*abad*’ and speaks of the ministry of the Levitical priests as ministers of God.⁴ Joseph is said to serve Potiphar in this sense as recorded in Genesis 39:4. The next word is דָּרַשׁ *darash*. It means “he sought and he inquired” as seen in Psalm 24:6. Genuine worship is a quest for God, to know him and to seek his will. This is an essential aspect of worship because true worship is based on the true knowledge of God. The last but not the least word for word-translated worship is סָגַד “*sgd*” or *Seged* in Aramaic. It means ‘to fall down, to kneel, to bow, to adore, to worship, to give honour, and to revere’. This word occurs only in the books of Isaiah and Daniel. *Sagad* and *seged* both means to prostrate oneself in prayer, implying thankfulness or supplication.

After defining the six verbs that connote worship in Hebrew, it is necessary to do a word study of the five nouns translated worship in scriptures (they can also be transformed into verbs). These include זָמַר “*Zamar*”, תְּהִלָּה “*Tehillah*”, בָּרַךְ “*Brk*”, תּוֹדָה “*Todah*”, and יָדָה *Yadah*. *Zamar* comes from a word associated with the string instrument. The music produced in worship (Ps. 66:2). It means to play on the instrument and make music vocally. *Tehillah* is taken from *hallal*, that is, to sing a new song, a hymn of spontaneous praise and glorifying God in songs (Psalm 34:1). *Barak* is to bow and give reverence to God as an act of adoration; this is continuous conscious giving God the first place. It means to be tuned to him and his presence (Psalm 34:1). *Todah* stands for an extension of the hand, adoration, a choir of worshipers, confession, sacrifice of praise, and thanksgiving (Psalm 50:14). The last but not the least word is *Yadah*. It stands for holding out the hand, to throw a stone or arrow at or away, to revere or worship with extended hands, and being thankful or thanksgiving (Psalm 33:2).⁵

Levitical

The word Levitical is an adjective coined from the noun Levites, derived from Levi, one of the sons of Jacob. Menachem Posner posits that the sons of Levi were selected to serve God in the Holy Temple after the disobedience scene at Mount Sinai. When God delivered the Israelites from Egypt and killed the firstborn of the Egyptians, he decided that the firstborn of Israel would serve him. This rule changed when the tribe of Levi refused to worship the golden calf of Aaron in the wilderness. From that time, the firstborn of the Israelites lost their special status, and it was given to the Levites.⁶ Their work included playing music, opening and closing the gates, and standing guard. In the case of the portable Tabernacle, they were responsible for packing up, transporting, and reconstructing it whenever the Israelites travelled to a new camp. It should be noted that the “most sacred tasks, including bringing the sacrifices, were reserved for the *Kohanim* (priests), descendants of Aaron, brother of Moses.”⁷

The second meaning of Levitical, as found in Judaism, relates to a rule of conduct and temple ritual derived from the biblical book of Leviticus. According to this thought, Levitical means

⁴ Dani D., the word *sharat* suggests the idea of a commissioned minister and representative of God. Thus, it implies a solemn dedication to service (see Agnes Tan) proper citation, please

⁵ Dani D., 2

⁶ Menachem Posner, *Who were the Levites?* Chabad.ORG. <https://www.chabad.org>, Jewish accessed 9/7/2024 on Tuesday at 7am, 1.

⁷ Ibid. 1. Levi had three sons Gershom, *Kehot*, and *Merari* who had different functions in the transportation of the Tabernacle. The tribe of *Kehot* was responsible for the Holy Ark and other accouterments, Gershom took on the curtains and *Merari* carried the beams, sockets and bars. In later generations, as population grew, the Levites were divided into 24 *mishmarot* known as guards. Each group served one week in the Temple before relinquishing their place to the next *mishmar* in the roster.

belonging to the book of Leviticus, the most important book of the Torah.⁸ The two meanings of Levitical will be used in this paper; namely, they relate to the descendants of Levi and belong to the book of Leviticus. Although the book of Leviticus is not uniquely about the descendants of Levi, it contains a lot about the rules of worship administered by the Levites.

Levitical Worship

Levitical worship from the above will mean the kind of worship prescribed in the book of Leviticus and administered by the Levites. Another expression for Levitical worship is sacrificial, ritual, material, and physical worship. This type of worship is ritualistic and sacramental. Nathaniel Micklem believes that the “worship of the OT church⁹ normally took the form of sacrifice accompanied by prayer, praise and sacred dance. The first chapters of Leviticus are concerned with the sacrificial system of worship. With the details of that system, Christians need not greatly concern themselves. Still, an understanding of what was meant by sacrifice is of high importance both for theology and for religion.”¹⁰ After defining Levitical worship and knowing what it is all about, attention will be shifted, in the following lines, to the sacrifices in the book of Leviticus and their purposes.

The Different Sacrifices in Levitical Worship and Their Purposes

All aspects of Levitical worship cannot be discussed in a limited paper of this nature due to the constraints of time and space. As touching the elements or components of sacrificial worship, Peter White lists the following elements: God, man, blood, and altar in this order.¹¹ Of all these four elements, the writer will focus on animal sacrifices. As for the institution of the sacrificial worship, White submits as follows:

After the Israelites arrived safely at the foot of Mount Sinai, and the Tabernacle had been completed, God showed them a new way of life with clear instructions on how sinful people can relate to a Holy God. Animal sacrifice became the means instituted by God to facilitate communion between himself and worshipers. In the offering of sacrifice, worshipers gave themselves to God and the shedding of the blood of the sacrificial animal became a vital power of life (Lev. 17:11). God honors this act and gives life back to the worshiper who is dead in sin and could not have fellowship with God.¹²

From the above, it is clear that sacrificial worship was instituted by God and not man as a means for man to make things right with Him. It should be noted that animal sacrifices were offered alongside other material substances like grains, oil, wine and birds. Below is a presentation of the different offerings and their purposes in building an authentic relationship between man and His creator and securing meaningful worship.

⁸ Chuck Swindoll, *Leviticus. The Pentateuch: Insight for Living*. The book of Leviticus was the first book studied by a Jewish child; yet is often among the last books of the bible to be studied by a Christian. Today’s readers are put off by the book’s lists of laws regarding diet, sacrifice, and social behavior. But within these highly detailed directives are enshrined the holiness—separateness, distinction, and utter otherness of God. In Leviticus, the devastation of sin on the human race is equally reflected.

⁹ The word church in the above quote is used in the general sense of those called out and set apart and not referring to believers in the lord Jesus Christ especially under the subject of holiness or separateness of a people.

¹⁰ Nathaniel Micklem, “Introduction of Leviticus.” In *the Interpreter’s Bible*. Vol.II, ed. George Arthur Buttrick et al. New York: Abingdon Press. 1-53, 10.

¹¹ Peter White, *Developing a Theology of Worship for Today: A Case Study of Leviticus 17:11*, September 2011, 4.

¹² *Ibid.* 4.

The Burnt Offering ('Olah)

Several synonyms exist for the above Hebrew word in cognate languages. This includes *ell*, as seen on inscriptions in Marseilles and Carthage, to mean “whole burnt offering.” Other inscriptions have the cognate *‘lh* with the *hiphil* verb form of the same root. When used this way, it indicates the manner of offering the animals, “offering it up” on the altar or “causing it to go up” in smoke on the altar. *Ell* is further used to show the extent of the incineration of the offering.¹³ Ugaritic sacrificial text used *srp* “burnt offering”, similar to the Hebrew *srp* often used to refer to incineration outside the camp of the leftover portions of offerings that could not be consumed by the Priest or burnt on the altar (Lev. 4:12.) *‘olah* occurs 287 times in the Hebrew OT and nine times in Biblical Aramaic as *‘alat* (Ezra 6:9).¹⁴

Basic Regulations of Burnt Offerings

In Lev. 1:4, it is said that the offerer shall lay his hands on the head of the burnt offering so that it shall be accepted to make atonement for him or her. This laying of hands served two purposes: identification with the victim and consecration of the victim to the Lord (Lev. 1:5). In this case, the basic meaning of atonement- *kipper* “to wipe, clean, purge” is intended. The burnt offering, with its associated grain and drink offerings, was essentially a food “gift” to God. It carried an atoning effect as a gift rather than as a means of cleansing. The burnt offering also played the role of appeasing God’s wrath.

The Purpose of the Burnt Offering

It was a voluntary act of worship to make atonement for unintentional sin in general, an expression of devotion, commitment, and complete surrender to God. Furthermore, the burnt offering was intended to be a pleasing aroma to the Lord and His relationship with the worshiper. It could also be used to express various sentiments and concerns in worship (Lev. 22:18-20).

The Grain Offering (*Minchah* Lev. 2:6, 14-23)

It occurs about 211 times in the Hebrew OT and two times in biblical Aramaic (Ezra 7:17; Dan 2:46). It has four primary uses, with its basic meaning being “gift”; either a gift of people to God or among people.¹⁵ It also means “tributes” when a presence is made to a vassal. In Leviticus and other priestly literature, it means “grain offering.” It was used in Cain’s vegetable offering (Gen 4:3,5) and Abel’s animal offering, as recorded in Genesis 4:4.¹⁶

Basic Regulations for the Grain Offering

The grain offering was to be offered in the Tabernacle, and later in the temple. It was either cooked on a griddle (Lev. 2:5, unleavened), fried in a pan (Lev. 2:7, unleavened by nature) or crushed grits of the first ripe grain (Lev. 2:14-16).¹⁷ Oil was often poured or spread on it or mixed into it. Incense was often added to raw grain to give it a pleasing aroma as it burns (Lev. 2:1-2, 15-16). A handful of grain was offered on the altar of burnt offering and never on the incense altar. Along with the salt of the covenant as a “sign offering” or “memorial portion.” The priest consumed the remaining part of the grain offering only within the Tabernacle precinct (Lev. 2:3, 10:16-18). When the priest offered their grain offerings, they were

¹³Richard E. Averbeck, “Sacrifices and Offerings,” 712 in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 712-13, 715-16, 718; Ugaritic texts in Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Ras Shamra and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 57.

¹⁴Averbeck, 57

¹⁵Gary A. Anderson, “Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel: Studies in Their Social and Political Importance”, V.41, *Harvard Semitic Museum Publications*. (Michigan: Schoolers Press, 1987), 27-36, 57-75.

¹⁶Micklem, 14.

¹⁷Jacob Milgrom, “Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary.” *The Anchor Bible* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1991), 178-195.

completely consumed by them on the altar (Lev. 6:19-23). Salt was added to show the enduring nature of the covenant God has “cut” with his people.

The Purpose of the Grain Offering

It was voluntary worship, recognition of God’s goodness and provision, and devotion to God. The grain offering was regularly presented to the Lord in association with “burnt” and “peace” offerings (Lev. 9:4, 17:14).

The Peace Offering (*selamim* Lev. 3:7; 11-34)

The singular form is *selem* used in Amos 5:22 only.¹⁸ The translation “peace offering” has been maintained here because of its flexibility in the meaning and purpose of the offering. Other meanings include “wellbeing offering” from “whole, sound, well”, or “fellowship” or “communication offering.”¹⁹ In Leviticus 3:1, it is known as a sacrifice of peace offering. *Zevah* is the underlined root of *mizveah*, “altar”, a place of sacrifice. *Selem*, or its plural, replaced *zevah* or *Zavah* in formal usage of the sacrifice of the peace offering (Lev. 17:7-8, Deut. 12:6, 11, 27). This offering was unique because of the worshipers’ communal celebration of sharing the meat of the offering. This enacted the fact that there was peace between God and his people and that the person, family or community was in a state of wellbeing. It was also the last to be offered when it was presented in series with other offerings. This type of offering is found in the Semitic and non-Semitic cultic systems of the ancient Near East (ANE).²⁰

Basic Regulations of Peace Offering

The animal could be either male or female (Lev. 3:17). It was less regulated than other kinds of offering because it was relatively free. In short, its regulation was very much similar to the burnt offering in the way the blood was used (Lev. 3:2b, cf. Lev. 3:8, 13 and Lev. 7:5). Only the common people were to eat the meat of the peace offering (Lev. 7:11-36) and no Israelite was allowed to eat the blood because the life of the atonement is in the blood that assisted to convey the victim’s life to God (Lev. 17:14). Both the fat and the blood were received for the Lord (Lev. 3:5 cf. Lev. 3:11, 14, 16; Lev. 1:9, etc.) The fat was a delicacy representing the Lord’s goodness to His people.²¹

Purpose of the Peace Offering

The peace offering might be made in fulfilment of a vow, as a freewill offering, or as a thank offering (Lev. 7:12, 16). The object was either salvation already received (thank offering) or envisaged.²² Saul offered a peace offering before battle (1 Sam. 13:9). It may be accompanied by fasting as in Judges 20:26.²³ Furthermore, the peace offering was used in the consecration and ordination of the Tabernacle and Priesthood. It was also important in its inauguration of the former (Lev. 9:4, 18 and 22). The peace offering was made to fulfil a vow, and the freewill offering could be made to fit any occasion of worship before the Lord. A form of the peace offering was the wave offering, representing the Levites as a wave offering unto the Lord.

Sin (Purification) Offering (*Tatta’t*, Lev. 4:1-5, 16:24-30)

It should be noted that deliberate or willful sin, or sinning with a high hand, was not covered by the sacrificial system at all (Num. 15:30). Hence, to suppose that the Hebrews made light of sin because they could counteract it with an offering is a big mistake. The offender could be a priest (Lev. 4:3-12), the people (Lev. 4:13-21) or an ordinary person (Lev. 4:27-5:13).

¹⁸ Milgrom, 220-221

¹⁹ J. F. Hartley, Leviticus, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1992), no. p.

²⁰ ANE means Ancient Near East. Another form is ANET meaning Ancient Near Eastern Texts.

²¹ Averbeck, 716.

²² Salvation is used here in the non-Christian sense.

²³ Micklem, 22.

Basic Regulations of the Sin Offering (Lev. 4:1-5 and 13)

It is worth indicating that the sin offering was not included among the offerings that were burnt on the solitary altars before the Tabernacle and the Temple. The reason is that those solitary altars lacked the facilities these two had, which warranted the elaborate use of blood. Hence, the burnt, grain, and peace offerings were not incorporated.

The main focus of the sin offering procedure was the use of the blood and not the meat. The blood was applied to the incense altar, disallowing the priest from eating the meat (Lev. 6:24-30). The fatty parts of the animal were offered up in smoke on the altar of burnt offering. The relative value of the required offering corresponded to the relative status of the person who brought it. For instance, a bull for the priest (Lev. 4:3-12), a bull for the whole congregation (Lev. 4:13-21), a male goat for the leader (Lev 4:28; 5:6) or a female lamb (Lev. 4:32 and 5:6) or as a concession to the poor either two doves/pigeons (Lev. 5:7) or a simple grain offering with no oil or incense (Lev. 5:11-13).

Purpose and Use of the Sin Offering

It effected mandatory atonement for specific unintentional sins, confession, forgiveness, and cleansing from defilement.²⁴ The sin offering was the central blood/atonement offering in the sanctuary. The worshiper could be forgiven of their sin by dealing with the contamination of the Tabernacle that it caused. In the case of physical impurity, the worshiper became clean (Lev 12:7-8; 15:31).

Moreover, the Tabernacle could be defiled without necessarily violating the law. This necessitated slaughtering the sin offering on the day of atonement to purify the Tabernacle from all known and unknown sins. There was no atonement, however, for sin done defiantly or with raised hand (Num. 15:30-31). For going astray, there was atonement.²⁵ There are several occasions where the sin offering was employed, such as at the inauguration of altar worship (Lev. 9:2-7, 8-11, 15-17), the consecration of the priest and the tribe-by-tribe dedication of the altar, etc. (Num. 7:16).

Guilt (Reparation) Offering (*asam*, Lev. 5:14-6:7)

Scholars are still divided on what makes the guilt offering different from the sin offering. Both offerings are widely regarded as the primary expiatory offerings in the Levitical system of worship. Milgrom submits that “the primary purpose of the guilt offering was to make atonement for desecration of ‘*sancta*’, the mishandling of holy (sacred) things, as opposed to the sin offering, which made atonement for contamination of *sancta*.”²⁶ The guilt offering is to make the ordinary holy, and the sin offering is to make the unclean become clean. In differentiating the guilt offering from the sin offering, Obed Lewi Yusuf and Nathan Hussaini Chiroma write, “The difference is that the guilt offering is vertically inclined; it involves sins that directly affect man’s relationship with God Lev.5:15-16; 17-19: 6:1-7. While sin offering is horizontally inclined, it affects the relationship between man and man Lev.4:1-5:13.”²⁷

Once it was established that the worshiper had sinned directly against the Lord, he was expected to bring the following elements: an animal (a ram or lamb without defect, Lev. 5:15, 18; 6:6) and a fine of 1/5 that is 20% of his income. The blood of the guilt offering was used to cleanse lepers and those who had committed pre-marital sex. Similarly, people who had worshipped idols were cleansed using the blood of the guilt offering. The animal’s blood was sprinkled on

²⁴Kenneth Barker, *NIV Study Bible, Grand Rapids*, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995, 150

²⁵ Hartley, 55.

²⁶ Milgrom, 49-50.

²⁷ Obed Lewi Yusuf and Nathan Hussaini Chiroma, *Sacrifices in Leviticus (1-8) and its Contextual Relevance for the Christian Community*, September 2021. <https://www.researchgate.net> accessed today 9/7/24 at 3pm, 3.

the sides of the altar. The fat, the kidney, was to be burnt to the Lord, while the rest of the meat was eaten by the priest and any male from the priest's family Lev.7:2-6. The function of the guilt offering was to obtain forgiveness of sins towards God (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:6, 10, 13, 18, 26).

Theological Significance of Levitical Worship for Contemporary Christians

It is rather unfortunate that contemporary Christians have a very wrong notion of Levitical worship. It is this lack of understanding of the essence of Levitical worship that contemporary worshipers have derailed from biblical standards of Christian worship, improvising man-centred worship that is full of manipulation and greed. Olagunju Olugbenga, writing on worship in contemporary Africa, laments as follows:

It is unfortunate that worship in contemporary times is not what it should be, the church has lost the sacredness of worship, all we see today is noise making and gymnastic on the altar. The sacredness of worship has been lost, what our leaders do today is to entertain the worshipers and collect offerings from them. They deny these innocent people from experiencing the true worship of God... Today dead formalism has replaced genuine worship of God. Worship is assessing life. This life when presented to God in worship, it averts the state of death in which man is and when this transformation is done, then worship is accomplished. The New Testament enjoins all believers to come close to the throne of God with a true heart having our hearts sprinkled with blood and be made pure from an evil conscience.²⁸

It is true that worship in contemporary times has become a thing of mere formalism unfortunately with the advent of new ministries and new theologies of worship. There is need therefore to return to the roots of biblical worship enshrined in the first seven chapters of Leviticus. Craig Keener believes that

Music styles, church architecture and the particular cultural dynamics of interpersonal relationships may change, but the holiness of the One true God remains non-negotiable. The Tabernacle represents both the nearness of God and the awe with which he must be approached, both God's eminence and his transcendence. We do not today express our recognition of this truth in the same way that the Israelites were called to, no should we. Many forms used to invite people to worship most relevantly may vary from one culture and generation to another; the truth that the forms communicate, however, must never be neglected.²⁹

Keener's submission upholds that the methods of worship may change. Still, the principles underlining worship, which is the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, and the efficacy of the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, cut across cultures and dispensations and should be upheld. In the same light, Nathan Hussaini Chiroma believes that, although the book of Hebrews is out to buttress the thesis that Judaism and its tenet, including the five Levitical sacrifices, are obsolete and that Levitical sacrifice is archaic, annulled, and should be discarded by Christians, such an opinion is sturdy because all scriptures are inspired by God and profitable for doctrine and training in righteousness (2Tim.3:16).³⁰ The significance of Levitical worship includes the following:

²⁸ Olagunju Olugbenga, Exegesis of Leviticus 17:11 in Light of Christian Worship in Contemporary Nigeria, *American Journal of Biblical Theology*. <https://www.biblicaltheology.com>, pdf. Accessed on Thursday 11/7/2024.

²⁹ Craig Keener, "The Tabernacle and Contextual Worship," *The Asbury Journal* 67/1.127-138, 2012, 8

³⁰ Nathan Hussaini Chiroma, *Sacrifices in Leviticus (1-8) and its Contextual Relevance for the Christian Community*, 4.

The Vicarious Sacrifice or the Atonement

The concept of atonement is central to Levitical worship. This is the reconciliation of humanity with a Holy God. The sacrificial system meticulously outlined in Leviticus reflects the seriousness of sin and the necessity of a blood-offering to cleanse and purify. The blood of bulls and goats served as a temporary covering for sin, pointing towards the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the spotless lamb of God whose blood will truly atone for the sins of the world. This calls for today's worshipers to always recall the great sacrifice of God each time they come to worship. The physical sacrifices in the Old Testament were intended to remind the Israelites that worshipping YHWH is a serious venture that should not be taken lightly. Contemporary worshipers, when making personal sacrifices in worship, should not think that it is by doing so that they will earn salvation. Salvation is by the grace of God through faith in the finished works of the cross.

The Concept of Priesthood-Mediation

The role of the priesthood in Levitical worship underscores the importance of mediation between God and humanity. The High Priest served as the intermediary, offering sacrifices on behalf of the people and entering the most holy place to seek forgiveness and favour from God. This priestly mediation foreshadowed the ultimate high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ, who did not only offer himself as the perfect sacrifice but also served as the eternal mediator between God and humanity, bridging the gap caused by sin and offering access to the presence of God for all who believe. Contemporary worshipers should go for Christ-centered worship, for Christ is the ultimate sacrifice. God gave His all for humanity's salvation, and man must give his all beginning with his heart for true worship to occur. Today, people want to take the place of God in worship. They define worship based on their understanding and not Scripture. Worship must be Christ focused and nothing less.

The Use of Symbolism in Worship

Symbolism permeates every aspect of Levitical worship, from the colours and materials used in the Tabernacle to the specific rituals and feasts observed throughout the year. The overarching theme of holiness, the separateness and purity of God, is woven into the very fabric of these rituals, reminding the Israelites of the need to approach God with reverence and awe. The cleansing, consecration and dedication rituals serve as tangible reminders of the call to holiness and the pursuit of righteousness in a fallen world. All the rituals, sacrifices and adornment of the Tabernacle and later the Temple articles were meant to reiterate the importance of holiness, reverence and orderliness in worship. Unfortunately, today's worshipers have violated these concepts. The grace and the mercies of God are being taken for granted. The door has been widely opened for worldliness and carnality to thrive in the church, even through the way worship leaders and Christians dress, all in the name of beauty and the need to look good.

The Concept of God's Provision

The essence of the grain and the peace offerings was to portray the goodness of God in providing for the needy. In the Levitical system of worship, there was fellowship. Fellowship is the feeling of togetherness. The peace offering was also known as the fellowship offering. In Leviticus 7:15-16, it is said that after the priest burns all the fat and the kidney of the peace offering, he waves the rest and eats it together with the family of the person who brought the sacrifice. What is the place of fellowship in our churches today? Men of God should not be concerned with the spiritual needs of worshipers and neglect their physical needs. The church should adopt a holistic approach to ministry. Denominational leaders embark on building gigantic structures and buying expensive cars with contributions from their poor members. This is greed and exploitation happening in the church. Any worship that neglects the physical needs of worshipers is fake.

The Concept of Holiness

Holiness is the major theme of Leviticus, as demonstrated by the sacrificial system. Christians are supposed to look beyond the blood and other rituals to see the essence of the rituals: holiness. The book of Hebrews, considered the best commentary of Leviticus, echoes this theme; “make every effort to live in peace with all men and be holy; without holiness, no one will see the Lord.” The sacrificial system upheld the demands of holiness, and an attempt to do otherwise was seriously sanctioned, even with death (the case of Nadab and Abihu). Unfortunately, today, Christians emphasize grace to the extent of throwing the ethics of holiness and morality to the winds. There is no order and discipline in the church. People live and do things anyhow without checks and balances. There is a need for men and women of God, pastors and Christian leaders to consecrate their lives daily as the priests of old. They should know that their calling is a high one and live up to expectations in keeping with the grace of God upon their lives.

Conclusion

The theological significance of Levitical worship offers a lens through which the profound truths of an enduring relationship with God and the power of sacred rituals are uncovered. By honoring the tradition of worship in the Old Testament in general and the book of Leviticus in particular, the contemporary worshiper will not only deepen his knowledge of the roots of the Christian faith but also enrich their contemporary worship practices with depth and meaning. Furthermore, it should be underscored that the Christian faith is historical, meaning that it started at a particular time in a specific place and manner and grew by revelation. A study of Levitical worship helps the worshiper uphold God’s holiness, the reality of redemption and the depths of sin. Contemporary worshipers are called upon to approach the throne of grace with the awe demonstrated by the Levitical worshipers.

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