

The Biblical Concept of Sacrifice and The Ghanaian Worldview: Relevance For The Modern Ghanaian Christianity.

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ABSTRACT: *Sacrifice is the ingredient that creates a lasting bridge in the deity- human intercourse. The Ghanaian culture holds such belief and is also equally a key theological concept in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. This paper sought to explore the Biblical and the Ghanaian worldview on sacrifice, the role it plays in their religious life and its relevance for the modern Ghanaian Christianity.*

Introduction

Sacrifice in general terms, is defined as the act of offering something to a deity in propitiation or homage especially the ritual slaughter of an animal or a person. Usually, the thing or person is victim of the process of the sacrifice. It could also be defined as the forfeiture of something considered to have yet a greater value or claim.

Most religions offer sacrifices for several and varied reasons: Among such are, the need for a thing or person to bridge some gap between the sacred and the non sacred ; the condition where there must be an offering that is most valuable of all in that the form it takes should be and must be in the superlative. In other words, it must be the most costly.

In other cases, the belief of a religion would require cleansing or some appeasing or atonement. In all these instances, the requirement takes the form of sacrifice. Sacrifice is a crucial ritual in almost every form of worship.

Interestingly, the Ghanaian culture holds such similar beliefs and is also equally found in the Hebrew culture of the Old Testament. Indeed, the New Testament which is made up of partly the traditions of the Old Testament until the death of Jesus Christ, and partly as a matter of fact, until date, the Christian way of life and worship after

the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus also demonstrates the significance of sacrifice.

Specifically, in the prophecy, life and mission of Christ Jesus, the importance and effectiveness of sacrifice is most poignant and abundantly evident. It was, as it were, the ultimate form of all kinds and types of sacrifices that were ever made and will ever be made.

This research therefore, attempted to trace kinds of sacrifice from our own Ghanaian cultural setting through to the Old Testament which by no means bears some resemblance with our Ghanaian sacrifice and then through the New Testament which fulfills the Old Testament. Jesus Christ, the penultimate whose death is the highest form of sacrifice climaxes the examples in the New Testament.

Against the background of this road map the significance of sacrifice will be discussed in order to draw the conclusions that point to the fact that sacrifice is crucial. That Sacrifice has spiritual implications that affect humanity especially as far as our Christian faith and walk in Christ Jesus is concerned.

Types of Sacrifice

There are basically six categories of sacrifice in Ghanaian traditional practice. These include propitiatory sacrifice, substitutory sacrifice,

mediatory sacrifice, communion sacrifice, gift sacrifice and atonement sacrifice.

Firstly, the propitiatory sacrifice is usually offered when the security of a society is threatened by famine, calamity, etc which caused the elders to seek advice from the traditional diviner so as to appease the gods. If the crises is severe it is often a costly sacrifice, a human sacrifice would be required. A propitiatory sacrifice is urgently needed if God's wrath was to be turned away from sinful humanity; it was not man or woman who initiated this sacrifice, but God himself. The Bible tells us that for while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6-8). The good news of Jesus Christ is that, by His propitiatory sacrifice, He has conquered death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10).

Next is the substitutionary sacrifice in traditional beliefs which very is similar to the propitiatory sacrifice. When someone is under the wrath of divinity or an evil spirit, the trouble will continue until that person dies unless substitute is provided on behalf of the suffering person. The substitute prescribed as sacrifice is often a sheep.

Also mediatory sacrifice is one that works between two people or two groups to bring them together into an agreement. (1 Timothy 2:5) indicates that there is only one official mediator between God and mankind whom God will accept being Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:15). People who seek other mediators are likely to come under the influence of demonic spirits.

Again Communion sacrifice represents Jesus' offering of His body and blood which is celebrated by the church in remembrance of Jesus sacrifice. It helps members to unite with one another, creates opportunity for the members to communicate and eat with God, open a way for members to bring their petitions and thanksgiving to their creator. Through the Lord Supper, we worship together, we also remember the second coming of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Furthermore, gift sacrifice is the act of bestowing a favor or an item to another person without expecting anything in return. Christian gift to God should not meant to obtain His favor, but grateful response to what He has done in our lives, we are to give willingly (2 Corinthians. 9:7).

Finally, Atonement sacrifice is the act by which God restores a relationship of harmony and unity between Himself and human beings. Since we are helpless to correct this situation (Proverbs. 20:9), and can do nothing to hide our sin from God (Hebrews. 4:13). According to John D. Kwamena Ekem, "His definition of atonement is, generally, understood as the state of "being at one or reconciled after two parties have been estranged from each other"

The Ghanaian "World View" Of Sacrifice.

Almost all, if not all the tribes in Ghana of the Western region of Africa are not unfamiliar to the word sacrifice and therefore every language in Ghana has a local word to refer to it ; such as *afɔleŋã* as in Ga, *afɔr* as in Fante, *afɔreɛ* as Asante Twi and '*vorsa*' as in Ewe just to name a few.

In Ghana, the three major religions are also not akin to this phenomenon of Sacrifice and these religions are Christianity, Islam and Traditional African religion. All Festivals in the country go through rituals that involve sacrifice which all have their meanings or relevance and place in their specific worship.

In Islam, they celebrate the *Eid ul Fitr* and the *Eid al Adha* in which they sacrifice a bull and a ram respectively in these two feasts. They claim they do that in remembrance of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac. In that ritual, they celebrate God's goodness to mankind.

In the traditional religion, the Fetish priests sacrifice cocks, sheep, goats and even bulls depending on the seriousness of the situation. If a child is sick the traditional priest who doubles as medicine man may require of the parents a cock,

hen or sheep of a particular colour and some items such as white Kaliko, schnapps or gin and some unique fruits such as kola –nuts .These items each have their significance and what they symbolize in the sacrifice. Leaders of an entire state may have to avail themselves for a ritual bath or cleansing with the blood of a bull to appease the gods for some wrath that was to be unleashed against them.

There is even human sacrifice where humans are offered in sacrifice for the solution of certain crucial situations. In the history of ancient Egypt for example, it is reported that there are selected priests who go to bury the Pharaoh in their pyramids and never come back due to their belief in immortality.

In Ghana, there are also several rituals that are carried out during special festivals which are more or less acts of sacrifice. This work discusses a few.

The *Odwira*, *Hɔmɔwɔ* and the *Akwesidae* festivals of Ghana all observe particular rituals that require the slaughter of an animal usually a ram .

The *Odwira* festival is observed by the *Akwapims* from the Eastern Region and their belief is that there must be a season of cleansing in order to have the favour and goodwill of the gods as well as their departed ancestors. In this way, the cleansing necessitated the spilling of the blood of a ram that was wholesome and not deformed by any standards. It is their belief that, the slaughter of the animal and the application of its blood as prescribed by their fetish priests would bring the regeneration and purification which they need as a people to receive good success, progress and general well being in their land.

Similarly, the *Hɔmɔwɔ* is another festival in which the *Gas* pour libation in prayers to their deities to whom they believed saved them from a devastating famine. In order to say thank –you as they commemorate their good fortune, a ram is slaughtered and offered as thank offering to their gods and some special sifted dried corn-dough

that is steamed and eaten with palm –nut soup is also sprinkled for these gods. The sprinkling is done at vantage points within the community. The element of sacrifice goes as far as sending some choice portions of the festive meals to neighbours and friends around.

Furthermore, the *Akwesidae* is the popular and most well heard of festival. It is celebrated by the Ashanti Kingdom of Ghana and here the *Asumankwahene* (the chief fetish for the stool occupant) will carry out certain rituals which involve the slaughter and sacrifice of sheep .The blood collected from this animal is sprinkled upon certain objects in the palace as well as the Asantehene (the Ahanti King) himself. This is by way of cleansing the king and his subjects. Other sacrifices are made that are not revealed for the public eye to see but are all in the aim of reaching the gods from whom they believed their help comes.

Also, in the Ashanti the death of the King required the head of another who accompanies him as a servant. In this kind of sacrifice, someone has to forfeit his right to life in order to fulfill a royal requirement at the death of the king of Ashanti. This comes very close to the way the Egyptian kings are buried together with some priests of their cult.

Ashantis have a rich cultural heritage and history which records the voluntary sacrifice made by a royal named Tweneboah Koduah who offered his life and blood for the success and growth of the Ashanti Kingdom. This offer was a great sacrifice he made when the fetish priest of that time – Komfo Anokye needed human sacrifice to establish the stability and the permanence of the kingdom. He did not just need a human being, but a royal person; and so history has it that, the sacrifice of this royal called Tweneboah Kodua caused the beginning of this ‘*wɔfaase*’ (matrilineal) inheritance. It was in honour of this royal who offered himself for the Ashanti Kingdom to permanently compensate the line

from which he came in the royal family by birth .This is how it traditionally came to be that the father ignored his own children and took care of his sister's children.

The Old Testament Sacrifice

The instances of sacrifice in the Jewish culture were not too different from the Ghanaian examples. The Jews prided themselves (and indeed, they were an envy to the rest of the world at the time before Jesus Christ) to be the "people of God". Those whom God choose from among all other peoples to be His own people. These Jews had traditions and customs which they followed based on the laws of Moses as well as the culture of their environment.

Therefore, they had laws and regulations that guided both their lifestyle and worship. Their culture was integral to their worship and the vice-versa. Every offering they made unto the Lord God Most High was a kind of sacrifice which carried its own reward or significance .They sacrificed grain, wine, birds, animals and even water! There was an occasion when each of these was appropriate and needful. Sometimes they all had to meet at one common place to worship and offer the required sacrifice as in the case of Elkannah, Peninnah and Hannah having to go to Shilo once in the year to worship and to offer sacrifices. (1 Samuel 1:3) People offered sacrifices as individuals ; in other cases , the whole nation came before the Lord to offer sacrifice in worship and there were several instances where the Kings or the Priests also did same on the behalf of their people.(Ex.24: 1-11)

In this Exodus account, God makes a covenant with the people of Israel and Moses had to execute the ritual by sacrificing bulls apart from the other offering. He took half of the blood and kept it in bowls; the other half, he splashed against the alter of the Lord. After he had read the Book of the Laws to the people of Israel, they also responded by pledging obedience. As a seal to their promise, Moses took the blood he had saved in bowls and

sprinkled it over all the people assembled as he pronounced that it was a sign of the covenant that the Lord had made according to His words of promise to Abraham.

This is a very important ceremony which demonstrates God's everlasting relationship with the people of Israel. This has been transferred also to Christians in Christ Jesus as His precious blood is sprinkled, washing cleansing and bonding them, to God and Himself. In other words, the covenant which the Jews enjoyed in God has been given unto Christians also through Christ Jesus.

Abraham, David and Solomon are key Bible personalities that are also worth noting for their acts of worship that touched the heart of God; or rather, they were special people in the Old Testament whose hearts God touched in such a special way in that, their offerings and sacrifice were very unique and are worth discussing, under this subject of sacrifice.

That is not to say that Noah, Jacob and the many others who offered unto the Lord are less important or not worthy of note but rather as a matter of, space the paper restricted the discussion to Abraham, David and Solomon.

Abraham as the patriarch of the Jews had an encounter with God. God actually called him out of His family and kinsmen to go to a place He, God, was to show him. As often as the Lord spoke to him this old man built an alter to the Lord. Building an alter was by itself, sacrifice enough since there was a format or design for constructing it using virgin stones. After building the alter he offers an animal from his livestock unto the Lord. (Genesis 12:7-8)

In one of the Divine visitations , the old man made an altar as usual but after driving away vultures from his offering, he fell into a deep sleep out of which the Lord spoke again to him.(Gen. 15: 10-18) and made a covenant with Abraham. This covenant, God has kept throughout the generations and has gained perfection through the sacrifice Jesus made with His life.

It was like a cycle in Abraham's experience –God speaks, he sacrifices, then the Lord speaks and so he sacrifices. Abraham was the first to tithe and that brought down his blessings from Melchizedek- the high Priest from Salem whose beginning nor end , no one knew (Genesis 14: 18-20)

The ultimate sacrifice that brought Abraham into the pleasure of God was the offering of his son Isaac.(Gen.22:10-12). This offering or sacrifice, brought God's highest promise of blessings upon him as God promised him blessings in the abundance of descendants and that, in Abraham all nations will be blessed.

What impressed God about this particular sacrifice of his son Isaac was the fact that Isaac was his most beloved. He would not have felt the cost of the sacrifice so much if he were supposed to sacrifice Ishmael the son of his maid servant. A good and acceptable sacrifice is the one that costs, the one sacrificing actually feels the pinch of letting go. It is the kind of sacrifice that make things happen. Noah's sacrifice of an individual to God brought the rainbow in the sky. In this kind, it was a sacrifice of praise and grateful thanksgiving and it moved God to make a covenant with Noah which affected all mankind.(Genesis 8:20-22).

David was another patriarch who was known for his unique relationship with God. He was described as a man after God's own heart. His sacrifice was characterized by thanksgiving, adoration and worship. One unique sacrifice which was noteworthy was the instance where he poured water that his men risked their lives to get for him to drink. He poured it out as sacrifice unto the Lord while he still thirsted as a sign of worship unto the Lord. All the victories he won at battles that he led and fought were lavishly celebrated after a sacrifice in thanksgiving to the Lord Most High.

King Solomon his son, who succeeded him as king did more than his father in the offering and

sacrificing unto God. (1 Kings 3:4) He sacrificed thousand sheep and God visited him. It is quite clear that at any good sacrifice there is an instant response from God to the offerer. Furthermore, after the sacrifice there is rejoicing and feasting. The joy of Easter for example follows the pain and solemnity of the Passion Week which consisted of sobriety, reflection and even pain. No doubt, Sacrifice has a deep rooted effect on the one who sacrifices and the one for whom the sacrifice is made.

New Testament Sacrifice

In the New Testament, sacrifice was also not an uncommon thing in Jerusalem and the entire Israel in the time of Jesus. Faithfuls came to the Temple to worship as was the Jewish custom and they followed the Laws given by Moses.

This was the Jewish religion where the worshippers came to the Temple once every year to offer the Passover Lamb and feast on the Passover meal.(Lk.2:14) Against this background , the kind of sacrifice they offered was both in commemoration of their escape from Egypt and in worship where the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies to present and sprinkle blood in as annual cleansing for the sins of the Jewish people who followed Jewish religion.

Other sacrifices as prescribed in the Jewish culture and religion were not in propiation of sin nor its atonement. Rather, it was customary as tradition demanded to go through certain rituals in the Temple. Such ones were the offerings parents sent on the eighth day of the circumcision of the boy-child (Lk 2:21-24) the presentation at the temple of incense at the Holy of Holies which the ministering priests took their turns by lots to serve at the altar, as in Zaccharia's case of the Passover Festival it was of such where Jesus seized the opportunity to make a resounding altar call to all and sundry who were present there at the temple. He invited worshippers to come to him for drink.

The reason for that festival was right there in their midst! The source of life and all that pertains to

life.(John 7:37). In John 1:29, John the Baptist announces Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He explained the eternal existence of Jesus as being there before he, John, was born (in spite of the fact that John the Baptist was older than Jesus by six months).

Jesus is the final sacrifice of God to be able to reconcile humankind unto himself once more. All that was happening through history was God's own designated course and divine plan, from Abraham right through to Jesus. He had His Salvation plan and strategy weave through personalities until it got to Mary who will usher in the Messiah by her humanity, obedience and simple faith.

Jesus Christ the Lord Himself, lived under the Jewish traditions and therefore, also celebrated the Passover Festival. Currently, there are Jews who still celebrate the Passover, and still carry over a sacrificial lamb to be slain on his behalf.

It is therefore, not surprising to come across the Ethiopian Eunuch coming to Jerusalem to worship even after the death, resurrection and ascension of the savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 7:26-38). The Apostles and those who believed in Jesus Christ lived in the 'New Way' and for them, there was no need for any lamb to be sacrificed ever again. He (Jesus Christ) had become their Passover Lamb. To this end, they simply gave offering in cash whenever they gathered to worship and they ate the Passover in memory of Jesus Christ our Lord (1Cor.11:23-26).

Relevance

Sacrifices are one of the major believes in most of the African culture. In the Ghanaian traditional believes as pertains in some African traditional religion, blood sacrifices are made to ward-off evil spirits, pacify gods against calamities, to seek help from deities, to bring reconciliation among others. Below are some of the specific examples and how they apply in Africa and for that matter

Ghanaian perspective vis-à-vis human and divine benefit of sacrifice, and sacrificial ideologies.

Ghanaian traditions consider sacrifice as a gift exchange and renunciation, the sacramental sacrificial meal, sacrifice as a communicative act, sacrifice as a purifying power, as well as some spiritualized modes of sacrifice.

The definition of the concept of sacrifice in the Ghanaian context plays a significant role in their religious beliefs and world view. Sacrifices are considered by Ghanaian as the ritual performances through which communication between worshippers and spirit beings may be made viable. It must be noted that sacrifices in this sense may include human beings, animals and in some cases some other sacrificial materials such as food stuffs, drinks and libations".

Bloodless sacrifices also include "consecration of human beings and animal s" Just as the biblical believes as indicated above, Ghanaian traditional believes that blood sacrifices are as important "power-laden substance that brings fertility"; it is moistened over the fields in order to increase the harvest.

The compound term "human sacrifices" has to do with all "cultic killings" of human beings. This also includes "self-inflicted death, complete laying down of one's life in order to pay a debt or to make atonement". A typical example is in the Central region where one person offered himself to be killed to pacify the gods against an epidemic, hence the festival 'Ahobaa festival' **Ahobaa Festival** is celebrated by the people of Enyan-Kakraba-Saltpond, in the Central region of Ghana to commemorate the sacrificial offer by *Opanyin* Ahor who offered himself for this noble pacification instead of the entire township.

In the Blood rites are often combined with fertility concepts. Usually, blood sacrifices are primarily made from "domesticated animals" (sheep, goats, cattle, pigs, fowl, horses and camels). The objective of the sacrifice will

determine the characteristics of the sacrificial animal. For example brightly coloured animal such as white colour signifies that the victims are sacrificed to the divinity of the sky.

The entire earthly career of Jesus was viewed as an expression of His inner self-giving to the Father. It could be concluded that the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross climax the entire earthly mission of Jesus, this could be viewed in accordance with the Christian theology of sacrifice. His bloodshed for men ratifies the new covenant. By His death on the cross, He fulfilled all the sacrificial prophesy of Calvary established by God's old covenant with men. He reconciled sinners to God by a lasting reconciliation and formed a new people cleansed by His redemptive blood. His sacrifice on Calvary inaugurated the Christian right and appropriately set forth its spirit sacramental on the cross".

In wrapping up, one can emphatically say that the sacrificial goat and self-reliant orphan lamb may be used as a step towards an acculturated Christianity in Africa.

These are beliefs from the Catholic tradition, and although they intimate some respect, the researchers do not agree with the whole self-defeating argument regarding the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which reduces the supernatural sacrifice of Jesus to nothing, in both scope and effect.

In the African context, the idea of a human carrier or someone who lays down his life for his fellow community members hinders the propagation of the message of the cross, because it does not enlighten people's understanding concerning Jesus' death for the following reasons:

- In most cases, human victims were slaves or people illicitly procured from distant places.
- None of the sacrifices would actually have replaced the victim, in the majority of cases in which human sacrifices were made.

There is no need to over emphasis the power of these human sacrifices to bring about healing,

effect harmonious relationships between the world of spirits and human beings, as well as promote peace, deal with epidemics and natural calamities, and enhance spiritual and material prosperity within African communities.

Conclusion

God Himself, in His own wisdom, became man in order to die that God Himself was crucified. In this way, He gave His life for us and to us. It is the greatest sacrifice in all history since the world began and this is the joyful heritage of every Christian including the Ghanaian Christian.

Particularly, the Ghanaian Christian who is familiar with the traditional customs of the Ghanaian culture has twice the cause to be grateful for the substitutional death, Jesus died for him. More especially, having the knowledge of sacrifices in our culture and worship where blood was the central and key element in our worship when it comes to cleansing and appeasing or seeking great favour , it becomes very meaningful to the Ghanaian Christian , what Jesus in all glorious majesty has wrought in his life and body for us.

Furthermore, with our chieftaincy system, the chiefs are revered and served but it is amazing how this chief of chiefs dies in our steads. In the Ghanaian order, the subjects' heads roll for the comfort of the chief. On the contrary, the King (Jesus) was killed for His people. It makes us as Ghanaians, deeply appreciate and actually get and capture the import and the significance of the death the sacrificed death on the cross for our sake that Jesus had to suffer.

The Asantes boast about Komfo Anokye their Fetish Priest who played a key role in the establishment of the Ashanti. History has it that he was supposed to have locked himself up to go for the keys of death and never returned. This indicates the divine superiority of Jesus who according to scriptures went down to hell and took charge, disabled the powers of the Devil, released

captives and took the keys of Hell!. He defied the powers of death and returned glorified.

This event is good enough to serve as a tool for witnessing to any typical Asante to come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ .

Finally, in our music world of artistes, the Gospel musicians compose lyrics that demonstrate the joy of the Christian from the Ghanaian perspective. With songs such as, “*watuamaka*”, (He has paid all my debt) “*Enyɛ akokɔ mogya*”(it isn't the blood of fowl) etc. clearly express the appreciation of the one redeemed. Sacrifice means so much to the Ghanaian and most especially, the Ghanaian Christian.

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