

### **MILLENNIAL SACRIFICES**

There are several references in the Old Testament prophetic writings to a future re-institution of animal sacrifices.<sup>1</sup> By far, the most extensive passage is Ezekiel 43:18-46:24, which is part of the overall description of a new temple and restoration to the land in Ezekiel 40-48. In the broadest sense, the two interpretive possibilities are a literal interpretation—the dispensational viewpoint—and a symbolic or allegorical interpretation, but within both categories there are a number of variations. The question is not academic since many non-dispensationalist see this passage as the silver bullet that destroys the dispensational viewpoint, as Pentecost observes: “An alleged inconsistency between this [the literal] interpretation and the teaching of the New Testament concerning the finished work of Christ, which brought about the abolition of the Old Testament sacrificial system, has been used by the amillennialists to reduce the premillennial system to an absurdity and to affirm the fallacy of the literal method of interpretation.”<sup>2</sup> In this paper, with a primary focus on Ezekiel 40-48, I will analyze the literal and symbolic approaches to interpreting the animal sacrifice verses and argue that the purely literal interpretation is the most satisfactory solution.

At the outset, it should be observed that the interpretation of the portions of Ezekiel 40-48 dealing with the temple cannot be divorced from the verses dealing

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 56:6-8, 66:21; Jeremiah 33:15-18; Ezekiel 20:40-41, 43:18-46:24; and Zechariah 14:16.

<sup>2</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come: A Study In Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1964), 517.

with animal sacrifices. It would be incongruous to take a literal approach to the one and a figurative approach to the other, and commentators often treat the two together. It is, therefore, helpful to consider the competing views regarding the temple in Ezekiel 40-48 in order to analyze the issue of the animal sacrifices therein. Walvoord concludes that there are five primary interpretations of the temple verses: (1) Ezekiel's description provides specifications for Solomon's temple, (2) the description provides specifications for Zerubbabel's temple, (3) the description is "an ideal which the returning pilgrims should have observed but did not," (4) the description "was intended to be a typical presentation only to be fulfilled by the church in the present age," and (5) Ezekiel's temple is literal and will be constructed during the millennial period.<sup>3</sup> The first two suggestions must be rejected because Ezekiel's specifications for the temple are substantially different—indeed, they provide for a much larger structure—than either of the first two temples. The third interpretation finds no support in any of the post-exilic writings. The fourth option is really one of several paths that an allegorical or symbolic approach may take, and will be addressed in more detail below. I will not attempt to address in any detail how those taking the allegorical approach have treated the specifics in Ezekiel's descriptions, but rather, will focus on the relative merits or lack thereof within the allegorical and literal approaches.

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<sup>3</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 309-10.

Representative of the allegorical view, Daniel Block views Ezekiel 40-48 as requiring a rhetorical, non-literal interpretation and offers reasons for rejecting a literal interpretation:

Nonetheless, Ezekiel's account should not be interpreted as a blueprint to follow in an actual construction project. Although the analytic tone has a ring of realism, with numerous reminiscences of earlier plans, explicit instructions to build the described structure are missing. Furthermore, not only does the design display many idealistic features; the dimensions recorded are exclusively horizontal measurements, apparently without regard for the vertical distances required by architectural plans. Accordingly, the purpose of this temple tour must be sought elsewhere....The precision in the measurements, the presences and size of the gateways, the emphasis on purity, the centrality of the altar, and the strict regulations controlling access to the inner court are designed to shame (*klm*) Ezekiel's exilic audience for past abuses (43:10). Expressed positively, Ezekiel envisions a day when abominations in the sanctuary cease (cf. 8:1-8), and all Israel worships Yahweh in spirit and in truth (cf. John 4:23).<sup>4</sup>

Later, Block describes the passage in these terms: "...the prophet will be given a tour of the heavenly residence of God, of which the tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple had been but replicas."<sup>5</sup> More typical of the objections to a literal viewpoint are those of G. K. Beale:

Those who see a literal temple structure as the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy usually interpret the sacrifices there to be 'memorial sacrifices' that commemorate Christ's death. In response, numerous commentators have pointed out that this would violate the principle of Hebrews: the Old Testament sacrifices pointed to Christ's 'once for all' sacrifice (Heb. 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10-18), so that to go back to those sacrifices would indicate the insufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for sin (cf., e.g., Heb. 10:18: 'Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin'). This would appear to amount

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book Of Ezekiel: Chapters 24-48* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1998), 510-11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

to a reversal of redemptive history and, more importantly, a denial of the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice.<sup>6</sup>

Rooker likewise states the primary objection: "To support a nonliteral interpretation, one could point out that animal sacrifices do not actually cleanse from sin (Heb. 10:4) and Christ's sacrifice has removed the need for any additional sacrifices (Heb. 10:10, 14). The question is, Why would they ever be repeated?"<sup>7</sup> Along the same lines, Fruchtenbaum comments on the primary objection to a literal approach: "A common argument against taking these verses literally is the question as to why such a system would be necessary since the Messiah has already died. If the death of Christ was the final sacrifice for sin, how could these animal sacrifices provide an expiation for sin? Therefore, some say, these chapters of Ezekiel must not be taken literally."<sup>8</sup>

Those that object to the literal interpretation are asking the right question. As Pentecost rightly observes: "If a consistent literalism leads to the adoption of literal sacrifices during the millennium, it becomes necessary to give reasons why such a system should be reinstated."<sup>9</sup> While the question is a good one, in my view, those rejecting the literal hermeneutic engage in fallacious reasoning in their analysis. Walvoord is correct in noting: "Objections to sacrifices in the millennium stem mostly from New Testament affirmations concerning the one sacrifice of Christ... While other objections are also made of a lesser character, it is obvious that

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<sup>6</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Temple And The Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology Of The Dwelling Place Of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 343-44.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Rooker, *Ezekiel* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 318.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link In Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2001), 810.

<sup>9</sup> Pentecost, *Things To Come*, 518.

this constitutes the major obstacle, not only to accepting the sacrificial system but the possibility of the future temple in the millennium as well.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, they draw their support from verses like Hebrews 7:27, which states: “Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people’s: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.” Also, in Hebrews 9:12, we read: “Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption *for us*.” And in Hebrews 9:26, we read: “For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” From these verses and others, non-dispensationalists find support for their primary objection to the reinstatement of animal sacrifices, namely that Christ died once for all time and any further sacrifices would have no expiatory value and, therefore, it would not make sense to reinstate the levitical offerings.

To those rejecting the reinstatement of animal sacrifices, a number of answers are appropriate. First of all, dispensationalists are not suggesting that the Mosaic system will be reinstated, but instead, a new order that relates to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31. Indeed, there are several important differences between the Mosaic offerings and those detailed in Ezekiel: (1) the physical temple dimensions are different from the first two temples; (2) the priests who conduct priestly functions are not taken from the entire Levitical line, but only from the sons of Zadok; (3) many of the components that had a high place in the Mosaic system are

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<sup>10</sup> Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 311.

not mentioned, including the Ark of the Covenant, the pot of manna, Aaron's rod, the tables of the Law, the cherubim, the golden candlestick, the shew bread, the Holy of Holies, and the High Priest; (4) there is no evening sacrifice, the measures for the burnt offerings differ, and while some of the feasts are mentioned, Pentecost is omitted and those things necessary for the day of Atonement are lacking; (5) there are not only omissions, but additions, such as the living waters from beneath the altar and the trees of healing; and (6) there is an emphasis in Ezekiel's description on "the prince" who has both royal and priestly prerogatives.<sup>11</sup> From these differences, Pentecost concludes: "The system to be inaugurated in the millennial age will be a new order that will replace the Levitical order, for there are too many changes, deletions, and additions to the old order to sustain the contention that, literally interpreted, Ezekiel teaches the institution of the Levitical order again."<sup>12</sup>

In further response to those rejecting the literal reinstatement of the animal sacrifices, it must be said that the sacrifices have nothing to do with expiation from sin. Typical of those that conflate the issue of the sacrifices with expiation are Beale's comments:

Those who see a literal temple structure as the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy usually interpret the sacrifices there to be 'memorial sacrifices' that commemorate Christ's death. In response, numerous commentators have pointed out that this would violate the principle of Hebrews: the Old Testament sacrifices pointed to Christ's 'once for all' sacrifice ..., so that to go back to those sacrifices would indicate the insufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for sin... This would appear to

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<sup>11</sup> Pentecost, *Things To Come*, 519-24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 524.

amount to a reversal of redemptive history and, more importantly, a denial of the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice.<sup>13</sup>

But dispensationalists are no more arguing that the reinstated sacrifices will expiate sin or in any way add to the finished work of Christ on the cross than they would argue the same for the Lord's Supper. Obviously the future sacrifices will not expiate sin, just as many of the same commentators readily recognize that the Levitical offerings under the Mosaic system did not expiate sin: "For *it is* not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins." (Hebrews 10:4). If those Mosaic offerings did not expiate sin, but looked forward to Christ's once for all offering, then there is no logical inconsistency with future offerings, without any claim of expiating sin, looking back to Christ's once for all offering. Pentecost is right to conclude, "What folly to argue that a rite could accomplish in the future what it never could, or did, or was ever intended to do, in the past."<sup>14</sup>

Some lesser arguments against the reinstatement of the sacrifices is that it violates Ephesians 2:14-16 in that the barrier between Jews and Gentiles is removed. This objection fails to distinguish between God's dealings with Israel and the Church, and in particular, fails to realize that God's purpose for the present age is different than in the millennium. Moreover, just because the position of Jews and Gentiles in Christ in this age is the same does not mean that their positions in the kingdom must be identical. Another arguments is that Ezekiel's prophecy cannot be literally interpreted because what is described is geographically impossible. The short answer to this objection is that it overlooked the topographical changes Jesus

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<sup>13</sup> Beale, *The Temple And The Church's Mission*, 343-44.

<sup>14</sup> Pentecost, *Things To Come*, 525.

will institute in the millennium, as recorded in Zechariah 14. Still others argue that the role of “the prince” in Ezekiel’s prophecy is in competition with Christ’s reign. This objection should be rejected because the Scriptures confirm that while Christ will reign, he will also delegate authority to others (e.g., Luke 19:17). Finally, some find the idea of sacrifices, with the blood and the stench, repugnant. Walvoord answers this argument well:

It would seem that [these objectors] have temporarily forgotten that the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament, while perhaps incongruous with western civilization aesthetics, was nevertheless commanded by God Himself as a proper typical presentation of the coming work of Christ. If such sacrifices were fitting in the mind of God to be the shadows of the cross of Christ, what more fitting memorial could be chosen if a memorial is desired for that same sacrifice. Obviously, a memorial is not intended to equal or to be a substitute of the real sacrifice, but as a ritual it is to point to the reality which is Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Turning now to the dispensational answer to the question of why the animal sacrifices would be reinstated, there is general agreement among most dispensationalists that the sacrifices will act as memorials of Calvary. John Walvoord explains:

Those who consider the millennial sacrifices as a ritual which will be literally observed in the millennium invest the sacrifices with the central meaning of a memorial looking back to the one offering of Christ. The millennial sacrifices are no more expiatory than were the Mosaic sacrifices which preceded the cross. If it has been fitting for the church in the present age to have a memorial of the death of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, it is suggested that it would be suitable also to have a memorial of possibly a different character in the millennium in keeping with the Jewish characteristics of the period.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 314-15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 311-12.

Pentecost likewise comments: “There is general agreement among premillennialists as to the purpose of the sacrificial system as inaugurated in the millennial age. Interpreted in the light of the New Testament, with its teaching on the value of the death of Christ, they must be memorials of that death.”<sup>17</sup> And the explanation by Arnold Fruchtenbaum is particularly helpful:

What will be the purpose of these sacrifices in light of Christ’s death? To begin with, it should be remembered that the sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law did not remove sins either (Heb. 10:4), but only covered them (the meaning of “atonement” in Hebrew). Its purpose was to serve as a physical and visual picture of what the Messiah would do (Isa. 53:10-12). The Church has been commanded to keep the Lord’s Supper as a physical and visual picture of what Christ did on the cross. God intends to provide for Israel in the kingdom a physical and visual picture of what the Messiah accomplished on the cross. For Israel, however, it will be a sacrificial system instead of communion with bread and wine. The purpose of the sacrificial system in the kingdom will be the same as the purpose of communion of the Church: *In remembrance of me*.<sup>18</sup>

The strongest support for the view that animal sacrifices will be reinstated is that that is what the Bible says. Opponents take on the burden of proof to demonstrate that the text must be spiritualized. And while a number of objections have been raised, several of which were addressed above, the objections are not sourced in the actual text of Ezekiel 40-48. Indeed, there is no indication that the passage should be taken figuratively. Grasping at straws, Beale places great emphasis on the fact that Ezekiel was taken to a high mountain (Ezekiel 40:2) and that there is a city on the mountain.<sup>19</sup> He concludes that since no literal mountain presently exists that fits the description, then Ezekiel is seeing the heavenly temple

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<sup>17</sup> Pentecost, *Things To Come*, 525.

<sup>18</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 810-11.

<sup>19</sup> Beale, *The Temple And The Church’s Mission*, 336-40.

and not a future earthly temple. This argument approaches the ludicrous since other passages indicate future topographical changes in the Holy Land, and moreover, the same argument completely undercuts the literalness of Jesus' temptation, which he surely would not deny. In Matthew 4:8, we read: "Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them." What mountain existed in the first century from which Jesus could see all the kingdoms of the world? And yet, the kingdoms and their glory were real! We must conclude that the literal approach to the Ezekiel 40-48 passage is to be preferred because there is no textual reason to abandon it. If God wanted to convey to Israel that during the millennium the sacrifices would be instituted, what more could He have said to bring home the point? Fruchtenbaum is correct when he states: "Therefore, some say, these chapters of Ezekiel must not be taken literally. If not, Ezekiel gives a lot of detail that would suddenly become meaningless. Furthermore, if all that detail is intended to be symbolic, the symbols are never explained and the non-literalist is forced to be subjective in expounding them and must resort to guess work."<sup>20</sup>

If we take a literal hermeneutic to Ezekiel 40-48, as well as other passages like Zechariah 14, it is inescapable that during the millennium God will reinstitute the animal sacrifices. In view of the once for all nature of Christ's work on Calvary, as confirmed especially in the book of Hebrews, the purpose of the future animal sacrifices cannot be expiatory. For these reasons, and consistent with the purpose

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<sup>20</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 810.

of the Lord's Supper during the Church Age, the view that the animal sacrifices are memorials appears to be the most reasonable.