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MINISTRIES

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Christ’s Sacrifice Once for All: Is the Levitical Priesthood Replaced?

Did Christ abolish the Levitical Priesthood? Did he cancel the Torah’s laws regarding animal sacrifices at the Temple? Many claim that he did because the author of Hebrews describes the Messiah as our high priest in heaven and the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. And so, many think that God must have replaced the Levitical Priesthood with the Messiah’s priesthood, and the Torah’s sacrifices with the Messiah’s sacrifice.

But this perspective raises a number of issues. For instance, if the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices were replaced when the Messiah died, then why did the apostles continue to worship at the temple and participate in animal sacrifices in the Book of Acts? And why does the Prophet Ezekiel predict that the temple, priesthood, and sacrifices will be restored after the Messiah returns in the future?

On the other hand, if we say that the priesthood and sacrifices have *not* been replaced, then how should we understand the teaching in Hebrews that the Messiah offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin? If Christ’s sacrifice was sufficient to atone for sin, then why would we offer animal sacrifices again?

No matter which position you take—whether you believe the priesthood and sacrifices were abolished or not—there are challenges to address. If you think they were abolished, you must explain the apostles’ continued participation in temple worship and Ezekiel’s prophecies of a restored sacrificial system in the future. On the other hand, if you believe they weren’t abolished, you need to explain how ongoing sacrifices are compatible with the Messiah being the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. So, which position should we take?

In this teaching, we will argue that the Levitical Priesthood and sacrifices were *not* abolished or replaced. We will demonstrate that the books of Acts, Ezekiel, and even Hebrews rule out that idea. Afterward, we will explain how this view does not conflict with the Messiah’s once-for-all sacrifice when we properly understand what animal sacrifices actually accomplished according to the Bible. Let’s dive in.

Does the New Testament Teach that God Replaced the Sacrificial System?

The idea that God replaced the Torah's priestly and sacrificial laws is part of a theological framework known as "supersessionism" or "Replacement Theology." According to this concept, following the arrival of Christ, the "Church" superseded Israel as God's people, and hence, the Law of Moses, which God gave to Israel, has come to an end. Since the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system were part of the Law of Moses, they have come to an end as well (See R. Kendall Soulen, "Supersessionism," *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 413-114. See also Ryan Lambert, "Getting to the Heart of Replacement Theology," *Messiah Online*, Sept. 5, 2021).

This concept emerged in the middle to late second century, when Christianity had become predominantly Gentile. Gentile Christian writers at this time began teaching that Christians had replaced the Jews as God's people, and that the commands of the Torah that were regarded as distinctly "Jewish" had been abolished. These commands included things like the Sabbath, food laws, and of course, the priestly and sacrificial laws. There were historical factors that contributed to the development of this theology, including the destruction of the temple in 70 AD and strong tensions between the Jewish people and Rome. In any case, supersessionism has deeply influenced Christian theology and continues to have an impact even today (Luke T. Johnson, "Christians and Jews: Starting Over – Why the Real Dialogue Has Just Begun," *Commonweal*, Jan 31, 2003).

For more on this as it pertains to the Sabbath specifically, see our teachings, "[How Christianity Went from Sabbath to Sunday](#)" and "[The Lord's Day Parts 1 and 2](#)."

So, the idea that the Torah's priestly and sacrificial laws have been replaced by Christ has been around for a long time. However, scholars are increasingly rejecting this idea. Scholars from what is called a *post-supersessionist* perspective argue that the New Testament does *not*, in fact, teach that the Torah has come to an end. That includes the Torah's priestly and sacrificial laws. According to these scholars, the New Testament does *not* teach that Christ canceled the commands to give offerings at the temple.

In his short book, *What About the Sacrifices*, Messianic Jewish teacher D. Thomas Lancaster mentions three "difficulties" with the idea that God abolished the priesthood and sacrifices. These reasons give us a good starting point for examining this topic from a post-supersessionist perspective. According to Lancaster, difficulties with the supersessionist position include:

1. It contradicts the Messiah's teaching.
2. It contradicts the practices of the apostles in Acts.
3. It contradicts the Prophets' predictions of the return of the Temple and sacrifices in the future millennial kingdom.

To these, we would add a fourth reason: (4) It contradicts the Book of Hebrews. Let's examine each of these reasons one by one.

Regarding the first difficulty, in Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—explicitly forbade us from thinking that he came to abolish the Law of Moses. So, if we think that Messiah canceled and replaced the sacrificial system, then we are violating the Messiah's explicit command against thinking that he came to do that. Furthermore, Yeshua said that nothing will pass from the Law until the end of the age and urged his followers to do and teach the commandments of the Law (Matthew 5:18-19). Why would Yeshua affirm the Torah's ongoing relevance if just a few years later he was going to replace the sacrificial laws at the cross? We have many teachings covering this passage, so

we won't spend time repeating ourselves here. For an introduction to the Messiah's teaching on the Law in Matthew 5:17-20, see our short video, "[Did Jesus Do Away With the Old Testament Law?](#)"

Speaking of Yeshua's followers doing and teaching the commandments, this leads to the second difficulty with the supersessionist position. Throughout the New Testament, the apostles continued to take part in worship at the temple, including the offering of sacrifices. This is not what we would expect if the apostles thought that the Messiah had abolished these things. And this is *definitely* not what we would expect if they thought the temple and sacrifices somehow undermined the Messiah's work on the cross.

For instance, in Luke 24, immediately following Yeshua's ascension into heaven, the disciples were "[continually in the temple blessing God](#)" (Luke 24:53). Commenting on this verse, James Edwards writes:

[T]he early believers make the temple—the very heart of Judaism—their communal base, from which the Spirit will lead them outward in mission (Acts 1:8).

—James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 735.

We should note that this verse comes right after Luke mentions Yeshua opening the minds of his disciples and explaining to them how the Scriptures foretold his suffering and resurrection, resulting in the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:44-49). So, at this point, the disciples should have had a very good understanding of the atonement that Christ's sacrifice provided. If sacrificing at the temple was in conflict with the Messiah's atoning sacrifice, then why would the disciples be continually worshipping at the temple? It would appear, then, that the animal sacrifices performed at the temple did not conflict with the disciples' understanding of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

As we continue to the book of Acts, Luke presents the apostles attending temple services every day:

Acts 2:46

[And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.](#)

Acts 5:42

[And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus \[Yeshua\].](#)

Why would the disciples attend the temple together every day if the sacrificial activities performed in the temple were abolished or at odds with the Gospel they were preaching? Luke also records that Peter and John attended temple services during the hour of prayer:

Acts 3:1

[Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.](#)

The hour of prayer refers to one of the customary times of corporate prayer at the temple. What's significant here is that these corporate prayer times corresponded to the daily sacrifices (Exodus 29:39-41; Numbers 28:4; Ezra 9:4; Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.65. See Craig Keener, *Acts 3:1-14:28* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1044-1047).

Again, it seems strange that Peter and John would attend corporate prayer at the temple during the exact time when the priests offered one of the daily sacrifices if they believed those sacrifices conflicted with the Messiah's work on the cross. Wouldn't attending such a service give the impression that they *endorsed* the sacrificial system? And if there is a conflict between animal sacrifices and the Messiah's sacrifice, wouldn't this perceived endorsement *undermine* the very Gospel that Peter and John were seeking to promote?

Finally, in Acts 21:17-26, Paul even joins others in completing a Nazarite vow and participates in public worship at the temple. Luke records that offerings were to be made for Paul and the others (Acts 21:26), which would have involved animal sacrifices, including a sin sacrifice (cf. Numbers 6:14-17). Later, during his trial before Felix, Paul states that he fully intended to present these offerings at the temple:

Acts 24:17

Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation **and to present offerings.**

We should note that James explicitly told Paul to go through these rituals to debunk the false rumor that Paul was teaching believers to abandon the Torah. In other words, Paul's participation in the temple service was for the purpose of demonstrating his *endorsement* of the Torah, which includes the priesthood and sacrificial system. For more on Acts 21:17-26, see our teaching, "[Setting the Record Straight: Paul and the Law of Moses \(Acts 21:17-26\)](#)."

If there is a conflict between the Messiah's sacrifice and the Levitical sacrificial system, then James's and Paul's actions in Acts 21 are strange indeed! Why would they endorse the sacrificial system if they believed that it was abolished or that it undermined the Messiah's work on the cross? After all, what a horrible message to send to the "many thousands" of Jewish Christians who were all zealous for the Torah (Acts 21:20). Instead of affirming their anti-gospel legalism, shouldn't James and Paul have rebuked these misguided believers? Why would they instead take deliberate steps to demonstrate that they themselves observed the Torah, including its sacrificial rituals?

The obvious answer is that James, Paul, and the "many thousands" of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem simply did not see any conflict between the Gospel and the sacrificial system. None of the early Christians did. As the scholar Jesper Svartvik writes:

Jewish Christ-believers continued to worship in the temple up to the very end of the book of Acts. This participation in the cult existed alongside their thinking of and describing Jesus' death as a sacrifice, so the two do not seem to have been understood as mutually exclusive.

—Jesper Svartvik, *Reconciliation & Transformation: Reconsidering Christian Theologies of the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 32-33

So, the apostles and earliest Christians continued to worship at the temple and even participated in the sacrificial system. Again, they would not have done this if they believed that the priesthood and sacrifices were abolished at the cross. But this raises the question: if the earliest Christians had no problem with the sacrificial system, why did later Christians *stop* participating in it? Why did later Christians start teaching that the Messiah's priesthood and sacrifice replaced the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices? Well, the later Christian rejection of the priesthood and sacrifices doesn't seem to have been for theological reasons but rather *historical* reasons. In other words, they stopped participating in the sacrificial system for the same reason that Jews stopped: the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. As the scholar Daniel Ullucci writes:

[E]arly Christians stopped sacrificing for the completely mundane reason that there was no place to do so.

—Daniel Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 135

It would seem that the supersessionist theologies of later Christian writers are not rooted in the teachings and practices of the Messiah and apostles. Instead, these ideas arose as theological rationalizations for the *historical* reality that the temple was no longer in operation. As Jesper Svartvik writes:

[W]e have good reason to believe that Christians did not stop sacrificing voluntarily. Quite simply, the Christian movement was forced to become a nonsacrificing religion for historical reasons.

—Jesper Svartvik, *Reconciliation & Transformation: Reconsidering Christian Theologies of the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 35

If the apostles taught that the Messiah abolished the sacrificial system at the cross, we would expect them to have stopped participating in it long before the temple was destroyed. And yet, they were “[continually in the temple blessing God](#)” (Luke 24:53). They met in the temple every day and even participated in the sacrificial system. According to the Book of Acts, Christians saw no conflict between the Gospel and the temple, and Christians only stopped participating in temple services because, after 70 AD, there were no longer any temple services to participate in.

This leads to the third difficulty with the supersessionist position. According to the Hebrew Prophets, God will restore the sacrificial system in the future millennial reign. For instance, Jeremiah 33:15-18 links the arrival of the future millennial reign with the restoration of the Levitical Priesthood, who are depicted as serving God by regularly offering sacrifices (Jeremiah 33:18). Isaiah and Zechariah likewise depict sacrifices taking place during this future time (Isaiah 56:6-8; Zechariah 14:21). Ezekiel even mentions that sin offerings will be offered again (Ezekiel 43:18-27; 44:27; 45:17-25; 46:20). As D. Thomas Lancaster writes:

Ezekiel dedicates eight chapters to a vivid description of the future Temple and its services—a future Temple in which the sacrifices are offered, in which the priesthood, the sons of Aaron the priests serve along with the Levites, and they offer sin offerings, peace offerings, burnt offerings, and festival sacrifices—animal sacrifices. This is the prophetic expectation: When Messiah comes, animal sacrifices will be offered again.

—D. Thomas Lancaster, *What About the Sacrifices? A Messianic Perspective on the Levitical Priesthood and Sacrifices* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2011), 41

If the sacrificial system was abolished at the cross, why will it be restored in the future? If the Messiah replaced it, isn't restoring it a step backward? And yet, if we take prophetic texts like Ezekiel 40-48 at face value, then we should expect that temple services and animal sacrifices will be reinstituted after the Messiah returns in the future.

So, as we've seen, the Bible shows us that the Messiah, apostles, and prophets saw no conflict between the Messiah's sacrifice and animal sacrifices. They saw no conflict between the Messiah's priesthood

and the Levitical priesthood. Instead, we have seen that they actually *endorsed* the Levitical Priesthood and sacrifices.

And this brings us to the fourth difficulty with the supersessionist position: the author of Hebrews himself affirmed the ongoing validity of the Levitical Priesthood and sacrifices. As New Testament scholar Matthew Thiessen writes:

[T]here simply is no evidence in Hebrews that the author rejects the ritual and cultic aspects of the Jewish law. Rather, there is strong evidence that he thinks these aspects of the law remain in effect at the time of his writing.

—Matthew Thiessen, “Hebrews and the Jewish Law,” in *So Great a Salvation: A Dialogue on the Atonement in Hebrews*, ed. Jon C. Laansma, George H. Guthrie, and Cynthia Long Westfall (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 185

What is the “strong evidence” showing that the author of Hebrews affirms the priestly and sacrificial laws in the Torah? One piece of evidence is the fact that he says the Messiah serves as our High Priest not on earth *but in heaven*. This is a significant point for the author. He goes to great lengths to explain to his readers how the Messiah can legitimately serve as a priest despite not being from the tribe of Levi. Why is that an issue? Because, as the author of Hebrews acknowledges, the Torah explicitly prohibits non-Levites from serving as a priest on earth:

Hebrews 8:4

Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law.

Since Yeshua is from the tribe of Judah (Hebrews 7:14), then according to the Torah, he is not qualified to serve as a priest on earth. That is why the author says that he would not be a priest if he were on earth because the Torah has already designated the Levites to serve as priests on earth.

Let’s stop for a moment and think about that. Yeshua cannot be a priest on earth because the Torah says only Levites can be priests on earth. But if the Torah’s regulations concerning the priesthood have been replaced, then why does that matter? If the Torah no longer governs the earthly priesthood, then why does the author of Hebrews care about the Torah’s regulations concerning priests? The reason can only be that the author of Hebrews believes that the Torah still governs the earthly priesthood. That is why he says that the Messiah is a priest in heaven because, unlike on earth, his tribal lineage does not restrict him from serving as a priest in heaven (Hebrews 9:24). Just as the Levitical priests never served in heaven, the Messiah does not serve as a priest on earth. Why is this significant? Because we see that the author of Hebrews approaches this issue *assuming* that the earthly priesthood, and the laws governing it, *were never abolished or replaced*. As David Moffitt writes:

The writer takes seriously the fact that Jesus has now passed through the heavens and entered God’s presence. This is one of the reasons that Hebrews so consistently locates Jesus’ priestly work in the heavens. On earth, the Law forbids him from legitimately holding priestly office and thus serving in priestly ministries (Heb 8:4). Such a claim indicates that the author has not simply dismissed the authority of the Law.

—David M. Moffitt, “Weak and Useless? Purity, the Mosaic Law, and Perfection in Hebrews,” in *Law and Lawlessness in Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. David Lincicum, Ruth

So, when the author of Hebrews says that Yeshua could not be a priest on earth, he is affirming the Law of Moses, which states that only people from the tribe of Levi can serve as priests on earth. This is a problem for the supersessionist position, which asserts that the Torah's regulations concerning priests have been replaced. The author of Hebrews says precisely the opposite. He says that the Messiah cannot be a priest on earth because the Torah prohibits it. This assumes that the laws pertaining to the Levitical priesthood still apply. For more on this, see our teaching, "[A Change in the Law \(Hebrews 7:12\)](#)."

Given these difficulties, we can confidently reject the notion that the Levitical Priesthood and sacrifices were abolished or replaced. As we've learned, the books of Acts, Ezekiel, and Hebrews preclude that idea. The New Testament upholds the validity of the priesthood and sacrifices, and the apostles saw no conflict between these practices and the Messiah's work on the cross.

The Messiah's Once-For-All Sacrifice

If the sacrificial system has not been abolished—and it seems very clear that it has not—then how should we understand the teaching in Hebrews that the Messiah offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin?

Hebrews 10:12-18

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

As we can see, the Messiah offered himself once for all time for sin. So, wouldn't offering a sin sacrifice at the temple after the Messiah's death and resurrection suggest that his sacrifice was insufficient to deal with sin? Many claim that it would. However, the apostles endorsed the sacrificial system and participated in it—including the giving of sin sacrifices (Acts 21:26; cf. Numbers 6:14-17)—*after* Yeshua's death and resurrection. Obviously, *they* thought that the Messiah's work was sufficient to deal with sin. So, why would they continue to participate in the temple system if that undermined his atoning sacrifice?

To resolve this apparent contradiction, we need to answer two questions. First, what does the author of Hebrews mean when he says that the Messiah's sacrifice was "once for all time"? And second, what does he mean when he says, "there is no longer any offering for sin"? The common assumption is that these statements imply that the Messiah's sacrifice has replaced the animal sacrifices. However, that is not actually what Hebrews is saying, and that interpretation doesn't make sense when we consider the purpose of animal sin sacrifices.

So, that raises the question: what *were* the animal sin sacrifices for? To put it simply, they functioned in the context of the physical sanctuary on earth. It is only in *that context* that animal sacrifices atone for sin. In other words, the purpose of animal sacrifices is distinct from the purpose of Christ's sacrifice. They accomplish different things and apply to different contexts. The author of Hebrews makes this distinction clear in chapter 9, when he says that animal sacrifices purify the flesh while the Messiah's

sacrifice purifies the conscience (Hebrews 9:13-14). We will unpack this more in a moment, but the important point here is that Scripture makes a distinction between the purpose of animal sacrifices and the purpose of the Messiah's sacrifice.

In his commentary on Acts 21, evangelical scholar Richard Averbeck highlights this distinction to explain how Paul's actions in the temple did not undermine the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. He also points out that this distinction can help us better understand the sacrifices that will take place in the future millennial kingdom:

[T]he apostle Paul even performed purification procedures and sacrificial procedures in the temple. **He saw no conflict between this and his acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for his eternal salvation.** The Old Testament sacrifices and that of Yeshua never stood in conflict with each other. **Both were efficacious, but on different levels.** Paul knew this. The writer of Hebrews knew this. The people in the Jerusalem church knew this. Everyone who understood the law knew this. Moreover, this understanding may shed light on the question of sacrifices in the millennial temple... **the sacrifices offered in that temple would have the same purpose as those in the Old Testament—on the physical and temporal level on earth.** This includes the burnt, grain, drink, peace, sin, and guilt offerings for making atonement.

—Richard Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church: Reading the Torah in the Light of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 338

So, according to Averbeck, animal sacrifices are efficacious only on a physical and temporal level here on earth. What does that mean? It means these sacrifices enabled worshipers to draw near to God *in the physical sanctuary on earth*. That was their purpose.

To explain, the temple, where the people went to meet with God, was a sacred space and had to remain pure and holy. This means that sin and impurity were not allowed there. So, if someone was ritually defiled by sin, he was not allowed to meet with God at the sanctuary. How, then, could humans, who regularly become defiled by sin and impurity, meet with God in the physical sanctuary? The Book of Leviticus gives us the answer. At the end of the Book of Exodus, after the Israelites finished building the tabernacle, the Torah states that the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle and that Moses could not enter (Exodus 40:34-38). This leads into the book of Leviticus, where YHWH speaks to Moses from the tabernacle and gives instructions for sacrifices (Leviticus 1:1ff). These sacrifices—especially the sin offerings—maintained the holiness of the physical sanctuary on earth. They purified it from the ritual contamination caused by human sin so that humans could draw near to God in this sacred space on earth. In other words, animal sacrifices dealt with the *ritual consequences* of sin and death. We see this idea conveyed in the midst of the Yom Kippur rituals:

Leviticus 16:16

Thus he shall make atonement **for the Holy Place**, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses.

See also Leviticus 15:31

Averbeck offers an excellent summary of what the sin sacrifices carried out during Yom Kippur actually accomplished. It is worth quoting him at length here:

The purpose of the slain sin offerings for the priests and the people was to purge the tabernacle from the impurities that had accrued to it during the previous year. Of course, this was the purpose of the sin offering blood manipulation procedures when they offered sin offerings through the year as well...After recounting the manipulation of the blood in the most holy place (Lev 16:11-15), the text says: “So he shall make atonement upon the holy place from the *impurities* [Hebrew *tum’ā*] of the Israelites and from their *transgressions* with regard to all their sins, and thus he shall do (also) for the tent of meeting which dwells with them in the midst of their *impurities*” (Lev 16:16, my translation). In applying this to the altar of burnt offering, Leviticus 16:18-19 says, “And he shall go out to the altar which is before the Lord and make atonement upon it, and take some of the blood of the bull (for the priests) and blood of the goat (for the people) and rub it all around on the horns of the altar. Then he shall sprinkle upon it some of the blood with his finger seven times and so purify and consecrate it from the *impurities* of the Israelites” (my translation). Finally, Leviticus 16:20 summarizes the outcome of all this and makes the transition to the scapegoat offering that follows: “When he [the priest] finishes purging the [most] holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat” (my translation). In this verse the holy place, tent of meeting, and the altar are all direct objects of the verb *kipper* “to make atonement, purge,” as is also the case in the summary at the end of the chapter (Lev 16:33). The blood manipulation atoned (i.e., purged) the whole tabernacle directly so it was now purified and (re)consecrated once again for the next year (Lev 16:19; cf. Lev 8:15). Transgressions and sins are mentioned only once in the unit (Lev 16:16) in subordinate relation to impurities. This is apparent from the fact that *impurities* is the operative term elsewhere in the passage, without sins and transgressions added (twice in Lev 16:16 and again in Lev 16:19). The transgressions and sins caused impurities that had accrued to the tabernacle through the year, from which these offerings purged it.

—Richard Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church: Reading the Torah in the Light of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 218-219

So, the purpose of the sin sacrifices prescribed in the Torah was to atone for human sin *with respect to the sanctuary*. They purified the physical sanctuary and “the flesh” (Hebrews 9:13). But they did not atone for sins *eternally* before God. Animal sacrifices did not accomplish the same thing as Christ’s sacrifice, and Christ’s sacrifice did not accomplish the same thing as animal sacrifices.

“But hold on,” you might think. “I thought God prescribed sin sacrifices to atone for our sins so that we could be saved. But now the Messiah has offered *himself* as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, replacing the animal sacrifices!”

This is a common assumption. However, the problem with this idea is that the author of Hebrews explicitly disagrees with it. According to the author of Hebrews, animal sin sacrifices *never* actually took away sin:

Hebrews 10:4

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Hebrews 10:11

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

Here, the author of Hebrews is explicit that God *never* took away sins on the basis of animal sacrifices.

He says that it is literally “impossible” for animal sacrifices to take away sins. Earlier, he describes these sacrifices as a shadow of the reality:

Hebrews 10:1

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.

In other words, animal sacrifices did not actually take away sin—they merely pointed to the thing that does. After all, as the author goes on to say, if an animal sacrifice could take away sin, there would be no need to continue offering animals every year at Yom Kippur (Hebrews 10:2-3). You would need to do it just one time, not annually.

What should we make of this? Well, according to the author of Hebrews, *God did not prescribe animal sacrifices for the purpose of taking away sin*. Only the Messiah’s sacrifice can do that. Animal sacrifices merely function as the “shadow” of that reality—they function to point toward the Messiah’s sacrificial work as the actual means of forgiveness for sin. Hence, animal sacrifices—whether performed before or after the Messiah’s work on the cross—could never detract from the sufficiency of the Messiah’s sacrifice because they perform an entirely different function:

Hebrews 8:4-5

Now if he [that is, the Messiah] were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. **They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things...**

One way we might think of this is to consider baptism. The ritual of baptism is a symbol of the salvation that the Messiah accomplished through his death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5). Baptism itself does not accomplish our salvation—it points to the one who does. But nobody would argue that baptizing new believers detracts from the sufficiency of the Messiah’s work of salvation. In this case, we understand that the Messiah’s work and the ritual that points to his work are complementary, not contradictory. It’s the same with the sacrificial system. Animal sacrifices could never take away sin—again, only the Messiah’s sacrifice is sufficient for this purpose. But this does not mean that the Levitical sacrifices are invalid in their separate role of pointing toward the Messiah’s work.

Now, at this point, someone might say, “Well, of course animal sacrifices never *took away* sin. They merely *covered* sin until the Messiah could come and remove sin through his work on the cross. In other words, the animal sacrifices provided a temporary covering for sin until the Messiah came and provided the permanent removal of sin.”

However, this misunderstands what animal sacrifices were for. Again, animal sacrifices atoned for sin only in the context of the earthly sanctuary. As Averbeck explained earlier, sin sacrifices addressed the ritual contamination caused by sin that had attached to the physical sanctuary itself and to the people. They removed the ritual consequences of sin, but they never were intended to remove the *eternal consequences* of sin. Animal sacrifices do *not* and *cannot* make atonement with regard to our eternal standing before God. They served as shadows pointing to the ultimate sacrifice of Yeshua—they are not the reality itself but only a symbolic representation of it.

In other words, atonement operates on two levels. First, there is what we might call “earthly” or “temporal” atonement, which pertains to the holiness of the earthly sanctuary and is achieved through

animal sacrifices. These animal sacrifices cleansed the earthly sanctuary so that God's presence could physically dwell among the people in the land. On a higher level, there is what we might call "heavenly" or "eternal" atonement, which concerns salvation and our individual relationship with God, and this is accomplished solely through Christ's sacrifice. The animal sacrifices on earth served as the symbolic representation of what the Messiah's sacrifice accomplished in heaven. Again, the author of Hebrews himself highlights this very distinction between earthly and heavenly atonement:

Hebrews 9:13-14

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify **for the purification of the flesh**, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, **purify our conscience** from dead works to serve the living God.

Here, the author of Hebrews explains that animal sacrifices do not purify the conscience but do purify the flesh. His point is that animal sacrifices operate on earth to achieve earthly purity, while Christ's sacrifice operates in the heavenly realm to achieve eternal purity. So, while animal sacrifices do "**purify the flesh**," they do not take away sin. They only atone for sin in the sense that they address the ritual consequences of sin pertaining to the physical sanctuary on earth; they do not address the *eternal consequences* of our sin pertaining to our salvation. The Messiah's sacrifice is the only thing that could ever provide eternal salvation.

To help illustrate this distinction, suppose you are my friend, and I know you are very particular about the cleanliness of your house. If I track mud into your house, I have caused two problems that must be solved. One is a physical problem—there is mud on your floor. The other is a relationship problem—I have disrespected you by showing that I don't care about your desire to keep your house clean, and so I have created a rift in our relationship. These two problems are solved in different ways. The physical problem can be solved by physically cleaning up the mud that I tracked in. The relationship problem can be solved by expressing regret for my actions and asking for your forgiveness. Receiving your forgiveness does not solve the problem of the mud that is still on your floor, and cleaning up the mud does not solve the problem of the damaged relationship. Each of these problems requires its own solution.

In the same way, when the Torah speaks about animal sacrifices providing "atonement," this is not the same as the "atonement" provided by the Messiah's sacrifice. Playing off our analogy, animal sacrifices function to wipe away the mud in God's physical house on earth, but they do not reconcile us to God from an eternal perspective. The author of Hebrews really means it when he says that it is "impossible" for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. They do not address the problem of sin in the sense of our relationship with God. They are efficacious only in regard to the physical sanctuary on earth.

In heaven, we do still need blood to atone for our sins for eternity, and we do still need a high priest to intercede on our behalf. But animal sacrifices and the Levitical priesthood cannot fulfill this heavenly need. They are limited to their function on earth (Hebrews 8:4). Hence, Yeshua became our high priest in heaven and offered himself as the sacrifice for our sin, reconciling us to God. He did not serve in the earthly temple, but his priestly work is according to the pattern that those earthly systems illustrated (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1). Yeshua's sacrifice doesn't affect the earthly system at all—rather, it establishes the heavenly system. In the same way, animal sacrifices don't affect the heavenly system, meaning, they don't affect our eternal salvation. So, there is nothing about the Messiah's sacrifice that invalidates or replaces animal sacrifices, and nothing about animal sacrifices that invalidates or replaces the Messiah's sacrifice.

No Longer Any Offering for Sin

Now that we understand the distinction between what animal sacrifices accomplish and what the Messiah's once-for-all sacrifice accomplishes, we can understand what the author of Hebrews means when he says, "[there is no longer any offering for sin](#)":

Hebrews 10:18

[Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.](#)

Many have understood this verse to mean that animal sacrifices are no longer necessary after Yeshua offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. However, as we discussed earlier, this interpretation (1) contradicts the Messiah's teachings, (2) contradicts the practices of the apostles in Acts, (3) contradicts the Prophets' predictions of the future Temple and sacrifices in the millennial kingdom, and (4) contradicts the Book of Hebrews itself, which elsewhere affirms the continued validity of the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system. So, how should we understand this verse?

Well, when we examine the context, we see that the author is contrasting the Messiah's once-for-all sacrifice with the repeated animal sacrifices performed daily and yearly (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:10). He says that unlike animal sacrifices, which could never take away sins (Hebrews 10:4, 11), the Messiah's sacrifice *does* take away sin in accordance with Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy. That is why the author quotes this prophecy in the previous verses:

Hebrews 10:16-17

["This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."](#)

The point is that the Messiah's once-for-all sacrifice accomplishes what animal sacrifices were never meant to do. Remember, earlier the author said that it is impossible for animal sacrifices to take away sin (Hebrews 10:4, 11). Therefore, it doesn't make sense to interpret Hebrews 10:18 as saying that animal sacrifices once removed sin but are now no longer necessary. Instead, when he says, "[there is no longer an offering for sin](#)," he is referring to *the Messiah's sacrifice*, not animal sacrifices. He is emphasizing that the Messiah's sacrifice effectively takes away sin, eliminating the need for *the Messiah* to offer himself again, as his once-for-all sacrifice fulfills the new covenant prophecy of removing sin.

The Messiah's once-for-all sacrifice does not abolish the earthly rituals that point to this heavenly reality, just like the reality of our resurrection to new life in Messiah does not abolish the ritual of baptism (Romans 6:3-6). So, when Hebrews 10:18 says "[there is no longer any offering for sin](#)," he isn't talking about animal sacrifices; he is saying that the Messiah is no longer offered for sin. He was offered once, and that one offering was sufficient for all time. What the author of Hebrews is saying here is that the Messiah does not need to be offered for sin ever again.

Ready to Vanish Away

Now, before we move on, it is important to point out that the earthly sacrificial system *is indeed temporary*. It *will* pass away someday in the future. From the perspective of the author of Hebrews, the earthly priesthood and animal sacrifices exist because humans are sinful and mortal, which are features of the present fallen age. Once the present age comes to an end and we enter the age to come, the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system will "vanish away" (Hebrews 8:13). However, the present

age, symbolized by the tabernacle, is “still standing”:

Hebrews 9:2, 8-10

For a tent was prepared, the **first section**, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place...By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is **still standing (which is symbolic for the present age)**. According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed **until the time of reformation**.

Here, the author of Hebrews states that we currently live in the present age, and the regulations “**for the body**” will be imposed “**until the time of reformation**”—meaning, until the age to come. Human sin and mortality still exist in the present age. Hence, as the author of Hebrews affirms, “**there are priests who offer gifts according to the law**” (Hebrews 8:4). That is, according to the author of Hebrews, the Levitical priesthood still serves a valid function on earth and won’t vanish away until the present age does. As Lancaster writes:

The writer of the book of Hebrews states that the Aaronic priesthood “is becoming obsolete and growing old and is ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:13) along with the rest of this transient, fading, present world. That is because the Aaronic priesthood pertains to this present world, this material, physical state. The Aaronic priesthood offers rituals that “deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation” (Hebrews 9:10). What is “the time of the reformation”? The “time of the reformation” can only be the transition from this present world to the world to come at the end of the Messianic Era...As the writer of the book of Hebrews states at the outset of his epistle, it is “the world to come, of which we are speaking” (Hebrews 2:5)...when we enter the world to come at the end of the Messianic Age, everything will be accomplished; heaven and earth will pass away, and what is becoming obsolete and growing old will vanish. That transition does not happen until the world to come. So if the Temple was rebuilt today, only the Aaronic priesthood could serve in it as priests, just as was the case in the days of the apostles. Messiah’s priesthood has not cancelled their priesthood. Instead his priesthood is in a different venue, a venue outside of this present world.

—D. Thomas Lancaster, *What About the Sacrifices? A Messianic Perspective on the Levitical Priesthood and Sacrifices* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2011), 52-53

So, as long as human sin and mortality are part of our reality—and as long as there is a physical temple on earth—the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices still serve a valid function within the context of that earthly sacrificial system. But there will come a day when sin and death are no longer part of our reality, when heaven and earth pass away and are replaced by a new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1, 4). At that time, there will be no more need for an earthly sacrificial system. It will be obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). This message from Hebrews, of course, perfectly aligns with what Yeshua said: nothing will pass from the Torah until heaven and earth pass away and all is accomplished (Matthew 5:18). This event will take place when the present age comes to an end and we enter the new heavens and new earth, where there is no temple (Revelation 21:1, 22).

What does this mean for us today?

Before we conclude, many might be wondering what any of this has to do with our lives as believers today. If the laws concerning the priesthood and sacrifices have not been abolished or replaced, then

what practical effect does that have on us? Well, there really is no practical impact right now since the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. Without a temple, there is nowhere for the priests to serve, and nowhere for sacrifices to be offered in accordance with the Torah. However, if the temple and priesthood are restored sometime in the future after the Messiah returns, as the Hebrew Prophets seem to say, then animal sacrifices will once again be offered (Ezekiel 40-48; cf. Zechariah 14:21; Jeremiah 33:15-18; Isaiah 56:6-8).

As we discussed, animal sacrifices function only in the context of the earthly sanctuary, so it is impossible for them to undermine the sufficiency of the Messiah's sacrifice. Sacrifices will function the same way they did in Moses's and Paul's time—on the earthly level in relation to the physical sanctuary. Again, Richard Averbeck puts it well:

The Old Testament sacrifices and that of Yeshua never stood in conflict with each other. **Both were efficacious, but on different levels...**this understanding may shed light on the question of sacrifices in the millennial temple...**the sacrifices offered in that temple would have the same purpose as those in the Old Testament—on the physical and temporal level on earth.** This includes the burnt, grain, drink, peace, sin, and guilt offerings for making atonement.

—Richard Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church: Reading the Torah in the Light of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 338

So, while the sacrificial system has not been abolished, it is not in operation at this present time. Similar to when the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon, there is no temple in Jerusalem and hence no way to observe the Torah's sacrificial laws like Paul did in Acts 21. But, if we take Ezekiel's prophecies in chapters 40-48 at face value, then there will be a temple and sacrifices after the Messiah returns in the future. At that time, these laws will be relevant to those who wish to participate in worship at the future physical temple on earth.

Conclusion

The Messiah did not abolish the Levitical Priesthood nor the Torah's sacrificial laws. This is clear from the Messiah's teachings on the enduring relevance of the Torah, the apostles' endorsement of the sacrificial system in Acts, Ezekiel's prophecies concerning a future restoration of the sacrificial system, and the author of Hebrews' confirmation of the Levitical priesthood's validity for the present age. The ongoing validity of the sacrificial system does not conflict with the Messiah's sacrifice because they operate on different levels—the earthly sacrifices pertain to the physical sanctuary in the earthly realm, while the Messiah's sacrifice functions on a heavenly level. Only the Messiah's sacrifice removes sin, which is something that animal sacrifices were never intended to do. As Hebrews makes clear, animal sacrifices purify only the flesh, not the conscience. Therefore, animal sacrifices, by their nature and purpose, do not diminish the value of the Messiah's once-for-all sacrifice for sin. Recognizing the distinction between temporal and eternal atonement resolves the apparent contradiction between the Book of Hebrews and the rest of Scripture.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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