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CHRIST AS ONCE FOR ALL SACRIFICE: A CULTURAL READING OF HEBREWS

ABSTRACT

The practice of sacrifices to the ancestors is still prevalent among some African Christians and it is inspired by various factors such as religious considerations or political aspirations through African renaissance. Furthermore, scholars argue as to whether this practice of sacrifices to the ancestors is Biblical or not. This article aims to determine that, from Hebrews, the demise of Old Testament sacrifices brings an end to ancestral sacrifice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Christianity in Africa is experiencing tremendous growth. Johnson *et al.* (2010:32) argue that, since the last century, Christianity in Africa has increased by at least 38.5%, whereas Europe experienced a decrease of 14.3%, and America, a decrease of 15.4%. A special accolade should be directed to the diligent work performed by the White missionaries, remembering the pivotal role played by African missionaries in the spread of the gospel in Africa (Mbiti 1977:30; Mbiti 1986:7; Oduro *et al.* 2008:3).

However, it is now more than three centuries since sub-Saharan Africa received Christianity from Europe. African Christianity has grown to such an extent that African Christians have an option to reflect critically on their experience of Christian faith without interference by, or dominance of external factors such as European missionaries. As a result, this article is a response to a demand for a nuanced African interpretation of the scripture (Ashby 1988:132; Simpson 2007:68). The essence of this nuanced African interpretation of the scripture is a call to African Christians to intensify their spiritual maturity through an in-depth interaction with the scripture, with

commitment to quell the critique that Christianity in Africa failed to touch the inner core of African culture which includes world views and beliefs (Nichols 1979:12). In some instances, this nuanced African interpretation includes a call to give a responsible and appropriate response to the old African tradition of sacrifice to the ancestors.

This article focuses on the practice of ancestral sacrifices by African Christians in the midst of the beneficence of Christ's sacrifice. Before exploring this practice of sacrifice to the ancestors, it must be stated that the practice of sacrifice is not unique to Africans; it is also practised by the Japanese, the Koreans and, in ancient times, by the Romans, Greeks and even the Israelites in the Old Testament (Bae & Van der Merwe 2008:1299; Ulluci 2008:361). At present, the practice of sacrifice to the ancestors is prevalent among the majority of the members of the African Independent Churches (Appiah-Kobi 1981:120; Meiring 2007; Botha 2008:1605; Kalengyo 2009:303) and some members of the African Christian mainline churches, such as Methodist, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches (Meiring 1996:16; Nürnbergger 2007:66; Simpson 2007:68).

This is not the first research conducted on the practice of sacrifice to the ancestors, but it is unique in the sense that it is conducted by an African from an African Christian perspective and takes as a point of departure the scripture and the sayings of Jesus as authoritative and final. Some of the conclusions drawn from this research may sound different from those of African scholars. For example, in his research entitled "Hebrews Christology and its contemporary apprehension in Africa", Nyende (2007:374, 378) drew the conclusion that Jesus is an ancestor and still regards ancestors as mediators of African Christians. Similarly, Kalengyo (2009:315), in research entitled "Sacrifice of Christ and Ganda sacrifice", drew a cultural conclusion that the Ganda tribe is inextricably linked to the ancestors as their source of life and identity. In contrast to the inferences of both Nyende (2007:374, 378) and Kalengyo (2009:315), this article emphasises a different conclusion on the implication of Christ's sacrifice for African Christians.

Consequently, the aim of the study on which this article is based was to critically analyse Hebrews on the demise of the Old Testament sacrifice and its implication in relation to the present practice of sacrifices to ancestors in the African Christian culture. The following research questions have a bearing in this study: Does the demise of Old Testament sacrifices and their replacement with Christ sacrifice bring an end to sacrifices within an African Christian context? Why do African Christians still practise ancestral sacrifice even when the sacrifice of Christ is declared in the scripture as

final, perfect and sanctifying? What is the motive for African sacrifice to the ancestors? What is the implication of the sacrifice of Christ?

The objectives of the article are threefold: First, to reinforce the faith of the African Christians in the promises of the sacrificial death of Christ. Secondly, to exhort African Christians to persist in faithfulness in Christ over against challenges to abandon Christ. Lastly, to offer a better hope in Christ through his sacrificial death on the cross. The value of this kind of study is facilitation of the communication of the Biblical message within the African milieu in an attempt to elicit a new understanding of Christianity that would be African and Biblical (Upkong 2000:9). Therefore, I understand the approach of this study as contextual, cultural and part of African hermeneutics of the New Testament. This study is contextual, because the practice of sacrifices is current practice among most of the African Christians. It is cultural as it attempts to perceive the current practice, beliefs and understanding of a sacrifice in an African context. As part of African hermeneutics of the New Testament, the research endeavours to produce a faithful and relevant theological praxis learnt from the Biblical text.

The method of research is a literature review of the works by some African Christians and other scholars, as well as the hermeneutics of Hebrews. This article provides a rationale for interpretation. This is followed by hermeneutical analyses of Hebrews with regard to priesthood, mediatorship and sacrifice of Christ. Lastly, the article discusses ancestors and African sacrifice and its implication in Christian faith. To conclude, an implication for continuing practice of ancestral sacrifices is briefly described.

2. RATIONALE FOR CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

This rationale is essential for understanding from which perspectives the author drew the conclusions of the research. The author perceives these conclusions as contributing to a holistic and evangelistic African Christianity. As a holistic African Christianity, it touches on social, cultural, personal and spiritual aspects of African Christian life. As evangelistic African Christianity, it calls for the appropriation of the gospel to African culture as judgement and renewal of individual identity.

2.1 Gospel and culture

Culture is a human response to an environment. According to Mbiti (1977:26), Nichols (1979:10) and Waweru (2011:98), culture is human patterns of life in response to human environment. It is reflected in the manner in which

we speak, dress, sing, and behave towards nature. The above suggests that culture is initiated by human beings. It is claimed that culture can be learned, changes continuously and has infirmities (Nichols 1979:11; Van der Walt 2006:3). In order to transform culture, one needs to touch the core inner values of the culture such as world view and religion (Nichols 1979:12; Kraft 1981:53; Van der Walt 2006:195). However, transforming the core inner values of the African indigenous people's culture by means of the gospel brought by the missionaries was either missed or superficial (Van der Walt 2006:32). Therefore, there is a vast concern about the impact of African Christianity on the personal life of the Africans and society.

In response to the relationship of gospel to culture, Mbiti (1977:28) claims that gospel is divine and has a final say on the culture. Therefore, Mbiti (1977:28) further emphasises that gospel must judge African culture. Mbiti (1977:29) claims that, although Gospel is associated with different cultures, it should never be domesticated or become captive of these cultures, but it should be allowed to liberate and transform cultures. To summarise, one should note that culture and gospel are not enemies. Gospel is like a compass to culture; without gospel, culture is ruined or loses its direction (Meeter 1975:89).

2.2 Authority of the Bible

The Bible is witness of the sovereign and liberating grace of God in Christ (Crawford & Kinnamon 1983:98; Migliore 2004:52). It can be said that the Bible is witness of God's transforming activity of an individual and the world, and the coming reign of God inaugurated in Jesus (Migliore 2004:52). The Bible has true authority which resides not in the text *per se*, but in the witness of the unique revelation of God in Christ (Crawford & Kinnamon 1983:98; Archtemeier 1999:145). This unique revelation in Christ serves as the locus of ultimate truth and the authority of the living God (Archtemeier 1999:146). Therefore, a positive interaction and dialogue between a text and the reader has the potential to transform African experience and world view into a new commitment in communion with God and others (Archtemeier 1999:146; Migliore 2004:52).

3. OLD TESTAMENT AND ANCESTRAL SACRIFICES

The study of sacrifices in postmodern Christianity seems to be an obsolete and outdated task. However, since ancient times, sacrifice has been a sacred ritual in nearly every religion. Sacrifice plays a crucial role in understanding the values and principles of practices of religion, especially in Christianity. In support of the above, Kalengyo (2009:302) declares

that the Christian understanding of sacrifice has not been clarified to indigenous societies which have been practising sacrifice in the traditional religions. This is the reason why some indigenous societies such as the Africans, the Koreans and the Japanese are still practising sacrifices to the ancestors as did the Jewish, the Roman and the Greek societies in the past (Ogilvie 1969:9; Burkett 1985:55; Bae & Van der Merwe 2008: 1299; Ulluci 2008:361).

3.1. Sacrifices in the Old Testament

In the context of the Old Testament, sacrifice is a religious act of offering an object in the form of an animal or cereal to honour the Divine being (Dunnill 1992:38-71). In the context of the Israelites, sacrifices were donated to Yahweh and sacrificial rites did not as such differ from those of other tribes such as the Canaanites (Anderson 1987:3, 23). An object is usually offered, namely animals such as bulls, cows, sheep, goats and domesticated birds or cereals such as wheat. Ancient tribes such as the Canaanites believed that their gods eat these sacrificial meals; Israelite sacrifices dedicated to Yahweh were unique, because Yahweh did not consume the food (Anderson 1987:3, 14). Again, Israelite sacrifices promoted an egalitarian system which fostered unity and commitment to a community (Anderson 1987:20). When the Israelites made sacrifices, the motive was expiation, communion and tribute to Yahweh (Ashby 1988:31-43). Depending on the motive, Israelites practised sacrifices such as cereal offering, peace, sin, communion and burnt offering (Lev. 1-5; Adeyemo 1997:34; Eberhart 2004:488).

These sacrifices continued to be practised even in the time of Jesus. Nevertheless, after AD 70 the practice of sacrifice by the Jews in Jerusalem ceased and was replaced with prayer and praise cults (Ashby 1988:52). According to Young (1975:10-21), after AD 70 the church began to spiritualise sacrifice and reject the actual practice of sacrifices on the grounds that the death of Christ was understood as the perfect and final sacrifice that annulled all other sacrifices. In conclusion, the above indicates that the Israelites' sacrifices were allowed by Yahweh, hence directed to Him. Later on, after the crucifixion of Jesus and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the church abstained from ritual sacrifices and used a spiritual language (Rm. 12:1; 1 Pt. 2:5) with regard to sacrifices.

3.2 The meaning and function of sacrifice in Africa

Understanding the meaning and function of sacrifices in African traditional religion is useful in reflecting on the reason why some Christian Africans

are still involved in them. Adeyemo (1997:33) delineates sacrifice as an act of worship where animal life is destroyed. Hambrook (1987:126), Ashby (1988:11-18) and Hasu (2009:198) state that sacrifice symbolises a gift to the supernatural to ensure favours; it maintains society and gods, and symbolises communion with the supernatural. Simpson (2007:68) argues that African sacrifices bring about harmony and reconciliation among the living and the dead members of the family group. The above discussion demonstrates the complexity of the sacrifice; sacrifice is a ritual act which establishes contact with the supernatural for exchange of benefits. It is also a reflection of an honour to the Deity who receives the sacrifice and identity of the donor in the process of sacrificing.

Adeyemo (1997:36-39) and Mbiti (1969:59) summarise the function and meaning of sacrifices in Africa in terms of gift theory, propitiation theory, communion theory, and thanksgiving theory. Gift theory implies that Africans perform sacrifices to the ancestors for the sake of giving something to them, that is, without ulterior motive. Thanksgiving theory means that sacrifice is for the sake of gratitude for the benevolence they received from ancestors. Propitiation theory entails that sacrifice is to appease ancestors in order to induce them to do well. Communion theory involves communion with the ancestors and family members for the sake of good relations. Ngewa (2006:1503) argues that fear is the prime motive for African sacrifices, because Africans fear that, if they do not sacrifice to the ancestors, they will not be blessed or things will not go well with them. In my observation, I believe that fear and exchange of favours are often the motive for doing sacrifices.

4. THE SITUATION AND PURPOSE OF HEBREWS

The audience of Hebrews were Christians for quite some time (Heb. 5:12), and were about to drift away from the Christian faith due to their experience of suffering from spiritual trauma which led to various psychological, political, personal, and cultural consequences (Heb. 2:1-4, 18). The spiritual trauma entailed that the audience embraced Christianity which rejects the external rituals of their traditional religion. As a result, they found it difficult to cope psychologically due to their missing the external rituals. They were suffering from political violation when they were persecuted for their faith in the Jesus (Heb. 2:1, 3). As they were in the early stage of developing their Christian faith, they were not yet spiritually mature and their personal weakness tempted them to relapse in their faith (Heb. 2:1, 3:12). Hence, for the purpose of this article, the audience is assumed to be a group of Christians who were severely tested and exhorted to endure and keep their faith in Christ (Brown 1973:13; Lindars 1991:4; Dunn 1992:13).

In the light of the above, it appears that the situation of the Hebrews audience is similar to that of African Christians. Africans suffered spiritual, cultural and political trauma when they experienced political oppression and injustices in the presence of some Christian missionaries who often collaborated with the perpetrators of colonisation or apartheid. This spiritual trauma was aggravated when apartheid was theologically justified in South Africa. Therefore, a call for African renaissance with its emphasis on rejection of imperialism and discrimination and embracing African tradition and its religion tempted many Africans to reject Christianity (Denis 2006:314). Again, failure of the mainline churches to provide alternatives to rituals of sacrifices prompted many Africans to relegate to African Traditional Religion. Personal influences of secularism or lack of spiritual maturity motivated others to drift away from fundamental Christian principles. The mere fact that there are some African Christians who drifted away from Christianity for personal, political and/or religious reasons remains a cause for concern. In the light of the above, the situation of the Africans is related to that of the Hebrews audience; hence, the purpose of Hebrews is relevant to African Christians' challenges. The purpose of Hebrews appeals not only to the original readers of Hebrews, but also to Africans to revise their understanding of faith and abandon action incompatible therewith (Lindars 1991:135).

As a result, and in the midst of the persecution, temptation and longing for the rites of traditional religion, Hebrews is aimed at strengthening the believers and exhorting them to commit to faith in Christ Jesus (Attridge 1989:22; 1992:100). Furthermore, according to Attridge (1989:21-22; 1992:100), Hebrews had numerous messages for both the initial and modern readers. First, readers are urged to hold their confession in Christ (Heb. 4:14, 10:23) as well as the hallmarks of the Christian experience, namely boldness, hope and endurance, despite all the challenges they may face (Heb. 10:32-34). Secondly, readers are summoned to approach the throne of God directly without interference from the intermediaries to receive the promises (Heb. 4:11). Lastly, readers are warned of the consequences of relapsing and being impatient (Heb. 10:13, 25, 29-31, 12:18-24). The above aims and message of Hebrews are still relevant for the African Christians who still face temptation to relapse or feel the desire to engage in ancestral sacrifices.

5. HERMENEUTICAL ANALYSES OF HEBREWS

A few aspects are analysed in this section in order to assess the impact of Christ's sacrifice on Christians. Some of those aspects are the role of the Old Testament priests and the implication of Christ's sacrifice.

5.1 Earthly sanctuary and its ordinances

In the Old Covenant era of the Old Testament, the earthly sanctuary¹ (Heb. 9:1-10) had two limitations (Lane 1994:119; Hawthorne 2008:1555). This is evident in a discussion on the structure of the earthly sanctuary (Heb. 9:2-5) and its regulation for worship (Heb. 9:6-10). The earthly sanctuary is a pejorative adjective for the cultic tabernacle to indicate its weakness and limitations (Brown 1976:377; Attridge 1989:231). However, according to Brown (1976:378), the earthly sanctuary refers to the tabernacle, or a tent built during the time of Moses (Ex. 26), whereas the Old Covenant could be a Levitical institution established by Moses. This earthly sanctuary had two rooms (Heb. 9:2) that stored unique contents (Ex. 30:1-5, 16:32-33; Nm. 17:8-10; Heb. 9:2b, 4, 5), that is, the holy place also known as the first room and the most holy place known as the second room.

The holy place in the earthly sanctuary symbolised the first room of the tabernacle in which priestly functions were performed (Lindars 1991:87; Schenk 2003:9). These priestly functions included daily trimming of the lamps (Ex. 27:21), weekly placements of the breads (Lv. 24:5), and daily incense offering and Sabbath sacrifices (Attridge 1989:239). The most holy place symbolised the heavenly sanctuary which belongs to the era of salvation (Schenk 2003:9; Lindars 1991:87). The ordinary priests regularly and always entered the holy place (Heb. 9:6); it had its own furnishings (Heb. 9:2b), and was separated from the most holy place by means of a curtain (Heb. 9:3). By contrast, the high priest entered the most holy place, also with its own unique furnishings, only once a year during the Day of Atonement with blood of animals for his own sins and for other people (Heb. 9:7).

On the issue of the limitations of the regulations of the old covenant within the earthly sanctuary, Hebrews uses very selectively the Day of Atonement as detailed in Lv. 16 (Lindars 1991:92). The Day of Atonement is also known in Hebrew as Yom Kippur. The animals sacrificed on the Day of Atonement were a bull, a ram, and two he-goats (Lv. 16:3, 7). The Israelites celebrated this day once a year in order to reconcile with Yahweh by confessing and sacrificing animals. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to sacrifice a bull for his own sins, a ram for burnt offering, a goat for the sins of the people and another goat (known as goat for Azazel, the name of the demon) was driven into the desert and abandoned. The whole process symbolised the removal of sins from the people and a sense of atonement to the people.

1 Sanctuary indicates a sanctified place or a place set apart by divine appointment for the performance of the ordained public functions of the high priest.

Furthermore, the Old Covenant system of law (Heb. 10:1-10) regulating ritual services in the earthly sanctuary was a faint outline (Ellingworth & Nida 1983:212) of good things to come (Heb. 10:1), that is, a New Covenant and future acceptance of direct access to God. Ellingworth (1991:84) further explains good things to come as forgiveness of sins (Heb. 10:17), perfection (Heb. 10:14), and consecration to God (Heb. 10:10, 14). The Old Covenant system had always been intended as a preparation, not as an end in itself (Heb. 10:5-6); hence, the blood of the animals sacrificed in the Old Covenant failed to secure perfection and a complete forgiveness of sins (Heb. 10:11).

From the above, the implication of the limitation of the earthly sanctuary is that the curtain (Heb. 9:3) symbolises that it was not possible to access God (Heb. 9:8), except through the high priest with cultic provisions (Lane 1991:226). This limited access to the most holy place points to the total otherness of God (Hagner 2002:118). Human beings, as sinful beings (Heb. 9:7), may not enter the presence of God with empty hands, but with blood sacrifices to donate to Yahweh.² Another implication is that the cultic sacrifices of the Old Covenant are external, ineffective and cannot cleanse the human conscience (Heb. 9:9,10).³

However, it must also be noted that the old tabernacle with its furnishings and elaborate rituals only temporarily useful until the time of the new order (Hawthorne 2008:1556). In support, Brown (1976:386) mentions that these cultic sacrifices had some value, but were limited in favour and fellowship with God, because they were dark intimations of the true revelation made by Christ. Furthermore, the earthly sanctuary was the sphere for the Old Testament priests, whereas Christ's sphere was the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 8:2, 5). In summary, it is true that the earthly sanctuary had structural limitations and ineffective ordinances.

5.2 Priesthood in Hebrews

In the Old Testament context, the priest was an individual from the nation of Israel with a divine calling to specifically be an intermediary between God and the human being (Schrenk 1988:357; Scholer 1991:21). Hebrews uses Old Testament priesthood to contrast with Christ's priesthood. The Old Testament priesthood descends from Aaron and a Levi tribe in Israel (Schrenk 1988:356), and it was hereditary since not every one from the Israel tribe was to be a priest (Judge 17-18; 1 Sm. 1-2). Old Testament priests served primarily in the sanctuary dedicated to Yahweh, as a result

2 The act fulfilled by Christ's sacrifice.

3 This will be discussed further in the next section.

their character was of a unique nature. Furthermore, Old Testament priests were mortal, sinful, and needed continuous sacrifices for their sins (Schrenk 1988:359). As a result, the Old Testament priesthood was distinct from other secular offices with regard to character and function.

5.2.1 Character

The Old Testament priest was dedicated to Yahweh and was regarded as a human being with sinful tendencies; hence, priests sacrifice for themselves (Scholer 1991:359). Furthermore, the Old Testament priests were regarded as holy. This was manifested through anointment as a symbol of holiness (Scholer 1991:17). The holiness factor gave the priest access to the sacred domain and to be in the presence of Yahweh (Ex. 28:36). Old Testament priests were expected to maintain strict purity with special prescriptions regarding marriage and sexual intercourse (Lv. 21).

5.2.2 Function

Old Testament priests had to fulfil several essential functions: to deliver oracles through the use of ephod, urim, thummim in order to consult God (Schrenck 1988:355; Scholer 1991:17); to teach Israel about the statutes of Yahweh and this action mainly occurred within the sanctuary (Scholer 1991:17);⁴ to perform cultic ritual service (Scholer 1991:17),⁵ And to offer blessings to the nation and intercessory prayer to God for the sake of the nation (Scholer 1991:17).

5.2.3 High priest

In the Old Testament, the high priest was regarded as a chief representative of all the community especially in the matter of religion especially in the matters of religion. (Zech. 3:1). In terms of the character, requirements were similar to those for the ordinary priest. However, due to the significance of the office, stricter stipulations were implemented for the office of high priest. For example, the high priest was regarded as having a greater degree of holiness and purity (Schrenk 1988:357). The function of the high priest was similar to that of the ordinary priest, but with the added

4 These statutes of Yahweh included instruction in the apodictic law, propounding law, guardian law and others.

5 This involves acts such as leading the worship service and offering sacrifices by following the process of approaching the altar, sprinkling the blood on the altar, and placing the flesh on the altar (Shrenk 1988:355; Scholer 1991:20). This function emphasises the mediatory role of the Old Testament priest; this later became the chief function of the priests (Scholer 1991:20).

sole privilege to access the most holy place during the Day of Atonement (Schrenk 1988:357).

5.2.4 Priesthood of Christ

According to Schrenk (1988:358), Christ's priesthood is distinct from the Old Testament priesthood in various ways. First, Christ's priesthood is in the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 7:1-19), not Aaron or Levites (Schiffman 2009:172). The Melchizedek order emphasises the superiority of Christ's priesthood over that of the Levites (Heb. 7:15-22). Secondly, Christ's priesthood is sanctioned following an oath by God (Heb. 7:21). Thirdly, Christ's priesthood is eternal and eschatological (Heb. 3:1-7:28), compared to the temporal character of the Old Testament priesthood (Schiffman 2009:172). The eternity of the Christ priesthood is attributed to the Sonship of Christ (Heb. 4:14, 7:28). Fourthly, Christ is sinless (Heb. 7:25-28) and did not have to sacrifice for His own sins, thus making Him a perfect incumbent for high priesthood.

Christ was appointed to high priesthood by God (Heb. 5:5-10, 7:17, 21). According to Scholer (1991:88), Christ is both heavenly and earthly High Priest. Scholer (1991:83, 85) further argues that Christ was granted heavenly high priesthood on entering heaven after he offered himself once and for all as offering and offerant on the cross. Furthermore, the title of heavenly high priesthood is not from eternity as such, but acquired immediately when he became obedient sacrifice and mediator between God and his people. As earthly High Priest, Christ sympathised with people (Heb. 4:15 ,5:2) and offered efficacious sacrifice once and for all. As a sign for the complete work he did, he is seated at the right hand of God (Heb. 10:12).

5.2.5 Mediator of a superior covenant

Christ as High Priest is also a mediator. Through his blood, Christ established a New Covenant (Heb. 9:15a) of which He Himself became a mediator (Hagner 2002:122). According to Hagner (2002:122),

a mediator is the one who serves as a bridge between two individuals or groups and the one who must have credibility with both sides, ideally with some participation in some sense with both.

Christ meets the conditions as He is both God and perfect human being and has credibility with both sides. However, Christ is superior mediator to Aaron and his sons or rather the Jewish priests (Brown 1976:377).

Furthermore, Hagner (2002:122) argues about the mediatory role of Christ as follows. First, Christ's mediatory role occupies two offices,

that of a prophet and that of a priest. As a prophet, He represents God to humanity and, as a priest, He represents humanity to God. These functions are intertwined; they cannot be separated. As full deity and human, Christ enables Himself to be all sufficient sacrifice that constitutes the New Covenant. Lastly, Christ's death constitutes a new time frame in salvation history (Heb. 9:15). The function of Christ as mediator is to intercede for us and present our requests to God (Attridge 1992:102; Barton *et al.* 2001:1038). Christ's mediatorship has the potential to intercede for our past, present and future actions (Attridge 1989:254; Dunnill 1992:170). As mediator, He guarantees that all those who accept His sacrifice and believe in Him receive their eternal inheritance as the benefits of the New Covenant (Barton *et al.* 2001:1038).

In further elaborating on the mediatory role of Christ, the author of Hebrews uses the will and covenant metaphors (Heb. 9:16, 17). First, when Christ died, a will was enacted for believers to receive their inheritance (Barton *et al.* 2001:1038; Hawthorne 2008:1557). The shed blood of Christ established a New Covenant and its effect results in a permanent future. Secondly, the meaning of the process of sprinkling blood to the Israelites and the utensils (Heb. 9:19, 21) indicated that something died in their place and that they can now approach God (Barton 2001:1038; Hawthorne 2008:1557). To summarise, Christ's blood which symbolised His death, enacted a New Covenant of which He is its sole mediator. As the mediator of the New Covenant, Christ intercedes for us to God and represents God to us. These roles are intertwined in Christ, and cannot be separated from Him.

5.3 Blood as a medium of entrance

In both the Old and the New Covenant, blood was a medium of entrance into the presence of the Lord (Heb. 9:11-14). To illustrate this, the author emphasised that Christ, like the high priest of the Old Covenant, had the right to enter into the most holy sanctuary not belonging to this earth (Heb. 9:11, 24). The reason for this is that Christ priesthood is perfect, unique, eternal and not confined to the dimensions of the traditional priesthood (Attridge 1992:101).

Christ entered into the most holy sanctuary by His own blood (Montefiore 1979:153), unlike the Old Testament high priest who had to enter with animal's blood. This entrance into the most holy sanctuary symbolised the entrance into the presence of God, nearness to the reconciled Divinity, spiritual sanctuary, the throne of God or heaven itself (Brown 1976:386; Attridge 1989:246; Craddock 2004:700). In addition, unlike the earthly priests, Christ's entrance occurred once and cannot be repeated. This

implies that Christ, as High Priest, will no longer die again to reconcile us to God (Brown 1976:396).

In the Old Covenant, the blood, ashes, water and fire were instruments of external purification (Num. 19:1-10; Lane 1991:244). Both Brown (1976:400) and Boring and Craddock (2004:700) argue that their effects were temporal and explained these as follows. First, they removed ceremonial pollution and produced ceremonial sanctification. Secondly, they relieved Israel of the inconveniences of being removed from the Jewish church and restored them to the society and observances of the ordinances. However, Christ's blood was superior to Old Covenant blood, as it is of Himself and cleanses spiritually, morally, and ritually; that is, Christ's blood cleanses the sinful heart and external body (Bruce 1981:205; Lane 1991:240; Hagner 2002:122). In the Old Covenant, the animal to be sacrificed was supposed to be spotless; likewise, Christ Himself was offered unblemished to God (Heb. 9:14). The purpose for this entire self-oblation was to secure eternal redemption for us and cleanse our guilty conscience or self-accusation so that we may serve the living God (Attridge 1989:248; Boring & Craddock 2004:701).

In elaborating the purification effected by Christ's sacrifice, Klawans (2006:53-55) declares that there are two types of defilement: ritual impurity and moral impurity. Ritual impurity (Lv. 11-15) involves direct or indirect contact with one of a number of natural processes such as skin diseases (Lv. 13:1-46), childbirth (Lv. 12:1-8), or human corpses (Nm. 19:10-22). In brief, ritual impurity is not sinful, but contagious, impermanent defilement and is ameliorated by rites of purification. Moral impurity results from committing heinous, defiling acts such as sexual sin (Lv. 18:24-30), idolatry (Lv. 19:31) and bloodshed (Lv. 35:33-34). Briefly, moral impurity is sinful and has deleterious effects on the land of Israel. The above discussion indicates that animal sacrifice could cleanse ritual impurity, as it excluded Israel from the sanctuary (Klawans 2006:55, 58), and animal sacrifice could not cleanse the moral impurity of Israel.

Brown (1976:405) warns that ceremonial purifications by means of rituals and animal sacrifices were temporally effective, due to the fact that they were divinely appointed. The one who appointed these cultic rituals and animal sacrifices in order to purify the flesh appointed the blood of Christ to purify the conscience. Furthermore, Christ's sacrifice is more efficient, because the divinity of our Lord gave a transcendent worth and efficacy to his sacrifice. Hence, Christ's sacrifice can cleanse both the moral and the ritual impurity of a human being (Bruce 1981:205). In summary, Christ entered through the spirit (Heb. 9:14) into the presence of God with His own blood in order to redeem us eternally by cleansing us

ritually and morally. As a result, Christ's blood provides access to God as well as external and internal purification which the animal's blood failed to do (Boring & Craddock 2004:701).

5.4 The unique sacrifice

Christ's sacrifice has a threefold purpose (Dunnill 1992:170). What did Christ purify? Where did Christ enter? What is the purpose of Christ's sacrifice?

First, Christ's sacrifice is superior to the Old Covenant sacrifice, as it cleansed us internally and externally and deservedly cleansed the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 9:23b).⁶ The ultimate goal of our purification and entrance into the presence of God was the removal of our moral and spiritual sins (Heb. 9:28).

Secondly, it was mentioned earlier that Christ manifested in the presence of God as both the High Priest and the victim (Morris 1988:290). This entrance as the one who sacrifices himself was made once for all time (Heb. 9:25, 26c, 28a). This means that Christ will never be sacrificed again and that His sacrifice is complete, perfect and final (Barton *et al.* 2001:1039; Hawthorne 2008:1537). This further implies that Christ's sacrifice is eschatological and nothing stands between it and the coming of Christ (Hawthorne 2008:1538).

Thirdly, Christ's sacrifice has a purpose for our future relationship with God. It has features of atonement sacrifice (Heb. 9:25b) which, in the Old Covenant, dealt with past sins (Lindars 1991:95; Attridge 1992:101). Therefore, the purpose of Christ's sacrifice was forgiveness of all human intentional and unintentional sins committed in the Old Covenant and in the future. Christ's sacrifice annulled and removed from us our sin, penalty and curse, like the scapegoat which was sent away by the priest (Dunnill 1992:172).

Lastly, just as a person dies once, so God resolved Christ to die once as an unblemished sacrifice and His second coming is for the salvation of those who believe in Him and for the judgement of those who reject Him. Briefly, Christ's sacrifice is perfect and cleansed us morally and spiritually. It was made symbolically in the presence of God. It is once for all time and will never be repeated. The effects of Christ's sacrifice extend to the past, present and future sins.

6 Read Attridge (1989:261), Lane (1991:248), Hawthorne (2008:1557).

6. AFRICAN SPIRITUAL WORLD

This section discusses the role of ancestors within the African context.

6.1 Who are the ancestors?

The African spiritual world consists of various spiritual beings such as the Supreme Being, Ancestors and Evil Spirits (Dickson 1970:45; Mbiti 1969:61-71; Kalu 1981:15; Adeyemo 1997:36). The Supreme Being is the Creator God who is believed to be remote and to be approached through intermediaries (Hambrook 1987:15; Meiring 1996:13; Mokgala & Thebe 2008:61). Ancestors are one of the vital spiritual beings which Africans admire, and from which they derive their identity, life and right of existence. They play a very significant role in African Traditional Religion and everyday life of most Africans (Nurnburger 2004:75). Evil Spirits are the spirits of those who were hurt on earth and who are now taking revenge (Kalu 1981:15).

Contact with these spiritual beings is through prayer, sacred ritual and dreams (Mbiti 1969:61; Meiring 1996:15). In terms of worship, several African scholars insist that Africans do not worship ancestors, but God; they only remember and respect their ancestral spirits through the sacrifices they make (Mtetwa 1996:23; Waweru 2011:98). However, it is dubious when Adeyemo (1997:31, 33) defines sacrifice in the African context as an act of worship and when he views worship as referring to the worthiness of an individual to receive special honour. Thus, as ancestors receive sacrifices, they are worshipped (Reed & Mtukwa 2010:157). The dwelling place of ancestors is not specific, but the suggested places are the kraal, the graveside, or at the back of the hut (De Heusch 1985:47; Meiring 1996:15). Furthermore, the recipients of sacrifices are usually the Supreme Being, but it is often the ancestors who are the recipients of sacrifices (Mbiti 1969:58; Adeyemo 1997:36). Animals, food, wine or honey are offered as sacrifices (De Heusch 1985:26).

It is not clear who qualifies to be ancestors, but the general understanding is that an ancestor is anyone who lived in this world and left descendants (Meiring 1996:14). However, those who injured the community are not regarded as ancestors, but become wondering spirits doing evil work (Meiring 1996:14). Hierarchy in this living world is maintained in the ancestors; that is, the elderly people, male persons and chiefs are deemed vital ancestors (Meiring 1996:14).

The duty of ancestors is to mediate between God and the tribe, bind the community together, provide for the daily needs of the tribe through rain and fertility, and preserve the customs of the tribe (Meiring 1996:14).

Their anger is manifested in the form of draught, famine, sickness or death (Meiring 1996:15).

7. HERMENEUTICAL LINK BETWEEN HEBREWS AND THE PRACTICE OF ANCESTRAL SACRIFICES

Since the demise of colonialism in Africa in the 1960s and the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, many Africans became disillusioned with Christianity. This was manifested in some Africans rejecting Christianity as a foreign and western monopoly of Africa, and integrated African Indigenous Religions with Christianity to make them one, thus practising deliberate syncretism. Others resorted to remaining with Christianity, but seek the authentic contextual response to the signs of times. Currently, with the growing number of Christian statistics in Africa, Africa is faced with a challenge of how to respond adequately to the gospel. The next section intends to highlight the response to the benefits of Christ's sacrifice against those of the ancestral sacrifices.

7.1 Ancestors and Old Testament priests

Compared to the Old Testament high priests, ancestors are mediators. They receive the prayers and offerings of Africans and pass them unto God. This implies that, like Old Testament priests to the Israelites, ancestors can intercede on behalf of Africans. Their appointment to this position is not clear, but it has gradually developed from African Traditional Religion. To foster positive relations, adherents of ancestral religion continuously shed blood to appease them. When induced or out of their own free will, ancestors have the ability to bless Africans so that they can prosper in life (Mtetwa 1996:23; Waweru 2011:98).

7.2 Mediator

Hebrews attempts at all costs to convince its readers about the superiority of Christ in all aspects: Christ is superior to Jewish ancestors (Heb. 3:3), sacrifices (Heb. 10:1-18) and priesthood (Heb. 7:12-28). Hebrews claims that Christ by His blood established a New Covenant with a permanent future.

Christ's blood symbolises a sacrifice decreed by God, because it is done willingly and rationally. This sacrifice is complete and Christ is seated at the right hand of God to advocate for us. The nature and obedience of Christ and the shed blood in His willing self-oblation made Him qualify for being our only mediator in the New Covenant. In fact, Christ is the only

mediator between us and God; no other intermediaries are allowed between us and God (Pink 1968:249). This implies that, as the only mediator, Christ is the only one to accompany us to God as priest and represent God to us like a prophet and, in the African Christian context, the only one allowed by God to mediate. To emphasise, as the mediator in the African Christian context, Christ is the only one who has credibility with both sides and who can represent us to God, since he is an unblemished human and Deity and was appointed by God from eternity to be our sacrifice of atonement and sole mediator to all nations.

The priests operating within the Old Testament priesthood were the divinely appointed mediators. Their offering of sacrifices was continuous, repeated and it was for their sins and the people. This indicates that they were not perfect, hence their function and sacrifices are replaced by Christ as the divinely appointed High Priest and mediator. Ancestors were also human beings who were mere creatures, sinful and in need of salvation, as compared to Christ's perfect humanity and Divinity. To summarise, Old Testament priesthood is replaced as intermediaries in the Old Covenant, because they were mortal, sinful and their ritual sacrifices were ineffective. In addition, the ancestors' role as intermediaries for African Christians is also nullified because, like the Old Testament priests, they were sinful human creatures and the sacrifices they received were continuous, never ending, and ineffective, like the Old Testament sacrifice. This stipulates that, for African Christians, ancestors are now replaced as intermediaries between us and God or between God and us. We no longer need to approach God via ancestors, but through Christ.

7.3 Benefits of Christ's sacrifice

Christ's sacrifice annulled, repealed and ended all other sacrifices. God instituted the Old Testament sacrifices as temporary, and preparatory, not as a permanent system (Heb. 10:5-6), and He never really enjoyed sacrifices, but rather the obedient heart (Heb. 10:6-7). Christ's sacrifice at the end of times was described as done willingly and with full human conscience, unlike the imperfect sacrifices of animals. Christ's sacrifice has benefits for African Christians which no other sacrifice can offer, namely soteriological, psychological and social benefits. Soteriological benefits entail that Christ's sacrifice set us apart for God, earned us forgiveness of sins committed in the old order, and cleansed us of our ritual and moral impurity. For African Christians, this implies that, if we endure our faith in Christ, neither death nor miscarriage can defile us. Our state of being perfected and sanctified by the blood of Christ has given us direct access to God. Furthermore, God is no longer far and remote,

but He is with us. The psychological benefit means that we have a clear conscience from sin, in Christ, and we know God's law from our hearts. This further implies that the African fear, which evolves from the traditional African world view (Oduro, Pretorius, Nussbaun & Born 2008:22), no longer rules us. As staunch believers in Christ, we are no longer inhibited by the fear of ancestors, witchcraft and impurity. The social benefits necessitate participation in Christian assemblies, and communal worship. Africans enjoy relationships; in the ancient African world, this included relationship with the family, tribes and ancestors. In the new era enshrined by Christ, this includes relationship with family, tribes, fellow believers in the church universally and with the Triune God. If Christ's sacrifice bears so much wealth for African Christians, why continue offering sacrifices to the ancestors and ignoring Christ's effort to secure our eternal redemption?

7.4 Sacrifice to ancestors replaced

Since God did not enjoy the Old Testament sacrifices He instituted in the Old Covenant, how about the sacrifices to ancestors or other deities? From the understanding of Old Testament scripture, God did not approve of the sacrifices of other foreign nations. God often warned Israel against participating in foreign nations' ritual sacrifices (1 Ki. 11; Isa. 1:11-20; Am. 5:25). Therefore, ancestral sacrifices cannot be on the same level as the Old Testament sacrifices. Ancestral sacrifices, such as those of the Greeks, Romans, Jews, Chinese and Indians, are nullified and ineffective within the Christian worship context. God appointed Christ to be our perfect sacrifice and mediator,

in this way the Old Testament biblical idea of sacrifice comes to an end ... Important is true worship of God, based on atonement of Jesus rather than on observance of the biblical law (Shiffman 2009:173).

Old Testament worship rituals are currently replaced by faith in Christ.

If Christ's sacrifice has such significant benefits, why still engage in sacrifices to ancestors requesting their protection, communion or purification? Is it not time for African Christians to reconsider the practice of sacrifices as unnecessary and obsolete? My evangelistic statement is that, with the acceptance of Christ's sacrifice, African sacrifices to the ancestors were relegated to faint outlines and copies of good things to come, that is, forgiveness of sins and new covenant in Christ.

In lighter terms, Ellingworth (1991:75) argues that

non-Jewish Christians should note that the dietary rules and purification ceremonies are ineffective not because they belong to alien and inferior traditions but because they do not preserve or maintain inward freedom from sin or openness to God.

This is true for Africans, because often sacrifices made to the ancestors did not relieve Africans from guilty conscience or provide eternal cleansing from any kind of defilement Africans incurred in their life. Therefore, African sacrifices can be regarded as preparatory and temporal for the beneficent sacrifice we have in Christ. Like the Old Testament sacrifices, African sacrifices to ancestors are unnecessary and ineffective for the worship of God. It is for this reason that they have been replaced by Christ's sacrifice. This is the implication of personal conversion to faith in Christ.

To understand the implication of this personal faith to Christ, Van Egmond and Van Keulen (1999:710) explain this as follows. Conversion to faith in Christ is characterised, first, by knowledge of who Christ is and what He has done. This knowledge must continuously grow. Secondly, conversion to faith in Christ implies approval or agreement with the facts from knowledge of Christ. Agreeing with the facts from knowledge of Christ implies personally moving from being interested in the facts to being in personal relationship with Christ. Lastly, conversion to faith in Christ calls for personal trust and dependence in the Lord Christ Jesus. This implies being in open and personal relationship with Christ and involving all the central faculty of being. African Christianity has moved through the first two stages and is now engaged with the third stage whose failure or success will, I believe, determine the future of Christianity in Africa. In Van der Walt's (2006:32) words, he calls this stage implication of personal faith and church membership. In summary, a person who is in a personal relationship with Christ will jealously guard that nothing will separate him from the love of Christ (Rm. 8:38, 39). As an African Christian grows spiritually, s/he will be aware that the implication of Christ's sacrifice transforms his/her inner conscience, personal life, communal life and society at large.

7.5 Danger of practising sacrifices to ancestors

The practice of sacrifices to ancestors is a ritual practice for the adherents of African Traditional Religion not Christianity. In the African Traditional Religion, ancestors are the intermediaries between God and the tribe; in Christianity, our intermediary is Christ. Therefore, when an African converts from ATR to Christianity, s/he needs to reconsider some issues, which s/he should leave behind. The central question is: What is the implication of practising ancestral sacrifices in the midst of Christ sacrifice?

7.5.1 Idolatry

Within the Christian context, ancestors become rival mediators to Christ. According to Gehman (1993:232,271), in the African Christian context, communion and sacrifices to ancestors lead to an act of idolatry and syncretism. First, Gehman (1993:232) points out that idolatry is merely a spiritual force represented by that image, and this spiritual force makes believers unclean (Dt. 7:25). In the African context, the spiritual power behind ancestral sacrifices is the ancestral spirit, not the Spirit of Christ. Secondly, Gehman (1993:232) further mentions that the power of fallen spirits who are serving Satan and who are hostile to God are behind idols (1 Cor. 8:5-6). Lastly, Gehman describes idolatry as a process of giving a creature the devotion that belongs to God and to allow it to take precedence over God's will. The existence of ancestral veneration, commemoration or worship for that matter, perpetuates the performance of sacrifices; all these rituals to ancestors are unnecessary, make us enemies of God, and prevent us from doing the will of God imprinted in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Gehman (1993:235) concludes as follows about the worship of ancestors: "Among the ancestors idolatry is a living danger". This is true, because the worship, veneration or commemoration of ancestors draw attention away from God and what he has done for us in Christ (Mcveigh 1974:37; Nürnberger 2004:75).

In contextualising the above discussion, Nürnberger (2004:73) argues that, like every nation, Israel had their ancestors, but they were regarded as dead and gone. The memory of ancestors reassured Israel of Yahweh's ongoing commitment. Yahweh was the centre of worship, the source of life and identity, and Yahweh was jealous of any rival deity. By contrast, in the African context, memory of ancestors assures and reminds Africans of their source of life, identity and history embedded in their ancestors (Oduyoye 1981:110). Unlike Israel, ancestors are viewed as the source of life, identity, meaning and right to existence. It is this kind of perception that should be transformed when Africans convert to Christianity. In African Christianity, Christ should play the central role and lead us to God. Ancestors should be viewed as dead and gone; there is no longer communion with them as they belong to the old order. For African Christians, communion with the ancestors for, among other things, seeking help leads to idolatry, as communion with ancestors hinders the role of Christ given by God.

7.45.2Syncretism

Magesa (1994:76) argues that, when Christianity was introduced to Africa, it was already a syncretistic unit of lived faith as it had absorbed components of different cultures and religions. Magesa (1994:76) adds

that, in the process to achieve maturity in faith, Africans must be allowed to make mistakes, even mistakes of syncretism. In response to Magesa, the following is essential: Communion and doing sacrifices to ancestors as a Christian is an act of syncretism. Gehman (1993:271) explains syncretism as the joining together of elements of two religions which are incompatible, and deny any unique revelation from God or Christ. On the one hand, Nichols (1979:31) argues that the practice of sacrifices to ancestors is a commitment of cultural and theological syncretism. Nichols (1979:31) further elaborates that theological syncretism is more destructive than cultural syncretism in the sense that it rejects the finality of the revelation in Christ and relativises the core truths of the scripture. On the other hand, Gehman (1993:271) also mentions that there are two kinds of syncretism, namely conscious and deliberate syncretism usually practised by African Independent Churches, and spontaneous syncretism which entails mixing unknowingly that which does not mix. African Traditional Religion, with its worship of ancestors and sacrificial rituals, and Christianity are two different religions. If Africans bluntly combine them, they commit conscious, deliberate and theological syncretism; deny and hinder the unique revelation of God, and commit a deliberate sin. According to Hebrews 10:29, if we profane the blood of Christ, we insult the Spirit of Grace and reject Jesus as Son of God. Consequently, we will have to expect fearful judgement from God (Heb. 10:27) and forfeit the promises of the New Covenant.

In response to Magesa, I acknowledge that Christianity received by Africans was mixed with elements from other cultures and religions. I also acknowledge that Africans are fallible human beings. However, this does not absolve Africans from the fact that they are responsible for the appropriate response to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this regard, communion and doing sacrifices to ancestors as a Christian is an act of theological and deliberate syncretism. The rejection of sacrifice to ancestors and other deities, the denial of communion with the dead and the acceptance of Christ sacrifice as final, perfect and eternal are the mandate to the universal church. African Christians, including other nations still practising sacrifice to the ancestors, are obliged to heed the authoritative word of God from the scripture that ancestral sacrifices are annulled and replaced with Christ's once for all sacrifice. The refusal or rather hesitance to accept the implications of the sacrifice of Christ hinders one's personal relationship with Christ.

8. CONCLUSION

To enrich the quality of Christian faith, one needs to acknowledge the implications of the sacrifice of Christ, which is superior to all other

sacrifices and invalidates all other sacrifices in the Christian sphere. Christ's sacrifice offers numerous soteriological, psychological and social benefits; hence, the African Christians need to practise sacrifice to the ancestors. It is the duty of the Christian church and the individual Christian to teach this truth to everyone, especially those from indigenous cultures converting to Christianity.

In response to the research questions, Africans are engaged in sacrifices to the ancestors, because they want to show their gratitude to ancestors, have communion with them and are willing to appease them; they fear being punished by ancestors. However, although the ancestors played a vital role in influencing the faith of Africans in God, the article has shown that their role is now obsolete and replaced by Christ. Ancestors, like the Levitical priesthood's sacrifices in the Old Covenant, now belong to the past. They are no longer intermediaries; our mediator ordained by God is Christ only.

The invalidation of sacrifice to the ancestors does not disparage African culture as evil and satanic. There are still some good features in African culture such as *ubuntu*, respect of elders, traditional dance, and so on. This is a topic for another article. In addition, for African Christians, the memory of sacrifices to the ancestors should not tempt them to relapse into African Traditional Religion, but should enrich and confirm their hope in the implications of the sacrifice of Christ. Africans should allow the gospel to transform the perception of sacrifices to the ancestors towards a new direction, and should not resist the introduction into African culture of the special revelation about Jesus's supreme sacrifice, in order to enrich and develop African.

In conclusion, for African Christians, sacrifice to the ancestors is replaced by Christ's perfect and superior sacrifice. It is no longer necessary to do sacrifices to ancestors in fear or exchange of favours, for Christ has secured for us all we need. Therefore, let us sincerely approach God in faith in Christ. Let us adhere to our hope in Christ. Let us help one another in love to come to faith in Christ. However, we should note that, if we ignore the marvellous work done by Christ's sacrifice, we profane the blood of Christ and insult the Spirit of grace. There is no other sacrifice that shall guarantee our forgiveness of sins.

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Keywords

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