

# EXEGESIS OF LEVITICUS 17:11 IN LIGHT OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

By

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## INTRODUCTION

The word ‘worship’ is derived from four different Hebrew words and six different Greek words.<sup>1</sup> A study of these words provides a basic definition of “prostration, paying of homage to, service, and showing of reverence.”<sup>2</sup> Tyler notes that ‘we can now see the word “worship” as being something of an attitude, a posture, and of lifestyle as well.’<sup>3</sup> This is played out well within the Old Testament as we see plenty of evidence of altar worship in Genesis through Noah, Abraham, and Jacob (Genesis 8, 22, 28). This could be thought of worship as a sacrifice. Into Exodus, worship is presented within the confines of a building structure, where people are able to worship God in the way they build a place to meet and engage with him. Examples of this are found within a good majority of the Old Testament through building specifications for both the tabernacle and later, the temple. Israel worshiped God within the four festivals that were celebrated consistently.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important verses on worship in the Old Testament is found in Deuteronomy 12:4: **“You must not worship the Lord your God in their way.”** This

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* Ed. By Merrill F. Unger (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000) 295. Also See ‘Worship’ in Old Testament Theological Workbook on CD-Rom 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Vine 2003

<sup>3</sup>G. Henten Davies “Worship in the OT” *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 882.

<sup>4</sup> These festivals are Sabbath Ex 31/feast of the unleavened Bread in Ex 12; Num 28; Day of Atonement and Pentecost Lev 23 and Tabernacles in Deut 16.

verse provides a foundation for how to observe what can be confusing ways of worship to our modern times. Worship is absolutely something done in God's way not the way of the world around us, and it clearly involves purity, consecration and sacrifice. David Peterson notes that "Decisive for understanding the Old Testament view of worship is the idea that **the God of heaven and earth had taken the initiative in making himself known.**"<sup>5</sup> Worship is not only something done God's way, but it was something put into place by him as well. As the Old Testament moves into the books of the prophets, God uses men to rebuke and correct the worship of his people going awry through their incorrect living. James Torrance summarizes this well from Isaiah 1:11ff and Amos 5:1ff:

They (the prophets) exposed the paganism of the rituals and the legalism of their belief that their sacrifices were efficacious in themselves. So God can say to them, through Amos: 'I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies...But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.' In other words, worship is no longer seen as an ordinance of and an obedient response to grace, it has become false worship-an abomination to God who says 'Take it away!'<sup>6</sup>

The main task of this paper is to develop a theology of worship from the text of Leviticus 17:11 using historical and grammatical tools as the basis for the development. The insight gleaned from the text will be contextualized in order to make meaning for Christian worship in contemporary Nigeria.

## **WORSHIP DEFINED?**

Yeboah notes that in the Old Testament worship is assessing life.<sup>7</sup> It is the ultimate or the essence of our being. Man is in the state of death and needs

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<sup>5</sup> David Peterson 'Worship'. [www.oldtestamentgateway.org/worship/htm](http://www.oldtestamentgateway.org/worship/htm) accessed 10<sup>th</sup> Sept, 2011

<sup>6</sup> James Torrance <http://adamsteward.wordpress.com/2007/12/21/review/worship/htm> accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Brandford Yeboah Notes on Old Testament Themes University of Ghana Lecture in the Study of Religions 2011.

transformation which is accomplished when life is presented to God in order to avert death.<sup>8</sup> The Lord told Moses that he has assigned this life on the altar to ransom the life of the people.<sup>9</sup> Worship starts when the whole life is laid on the altar for YHWH.<sup>10</sup> From the perspective of the Old Testament worship is the essence of being alive in other words worship is life, it is the ultimate of our relationship with God.<sup>11</sup> God created human being in order to worship him who is life. But the dispensational theology has robbed much of the evangelical church of the sense that it can really learn from the Old Testament, let alone that Old Testament teaching might still be binding.

### **IMMEDIATE CONTEXT TO LEV 17:11**

According to Milgrom, verse 11 forms the center of a larger chiasm which begins from vs 10 and ends in vs 12. The immediate context to this verse describes the consequence of disobedience to YHWH'S injunction.<sup>12</sup> Milgrom observes that "YHWH has promised punishment to those who sacrificed to infernal gods and to those who ingests blood."<sup>13</sup> He thus notes three folds implication of this

1. All worship should be directed to YHWH whoever that sacrificed to other gods would be cut off from the people.<sup>14</sup>
2. Blood is sacred to YHWH the reason for this is that life is in the blood and the sacredness of ot should be preserved<sup>15</sup>
3. YHWH is central to every worship; therefore worship should be done with all reverence.

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<sup>8</sup> Yeboah Notes on Old Testament Themes

<sup>9</sup> Torrance [www.adamsteward.com/worship](http://www.adamsteward.com/worship)

<sup>10</sup> Torrance [www.adamsteward.com/worship](http://www.adamsteward.com/worship)

<sup>11</sup> Torrance [www.adamsteward.com/worship](http://www.adamsteward.com/worship)

<sup>12</sup> Jacob Milgrom 'Commentary on Leviticus 17-22' *Anchor Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 1118

<sup>13</sup> Migrom 1118

<sup>14</sup> Milgrom

<sup>15</sup> Milgrom

## CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF LEV 17:11

Leviticus 17:11 <sup>WTT</sup> כִּי נֶפֶשׁ הַבָּשָׂר בַּדָּם הוּא וְאֲנִי נֹתְתִיו  
לְכֶם עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְכַפֵּר עַ

כִּי conjunction introduces the phrase בַּדָּם הַבָּשָׂר “the life of the flesh is in the blood” the word נֶפֶשׁ *nepesh* and בַּדָּם *badam* are more important in this verse. *Nepesh* means life -giving (Gen 1:30 and Gen 2:7) and *dam* means blood. This blood contains life although when the life is poured out death sets in. The giver of both life and blood is YHWH in the rite appointed he said וְאֲנִי נֹתְתִיו לְכֶם “And I have given it to you; upon the altar to make atonement for your souls.” Yhwh declares I am the giver of the provision for the atonement. <sup>16</sup>

1. “I have given it to you upon the altar.” <sup>17</sup> לְכֶם “to you” this involves the priest who is given the mandate to lead in the ritual worship. He is to shed the blood for the atonement. Blood is significant in the ritual worship and it must be handled with care. The blood is emphatically the characteristic thing in the Levitical ritual, the very basis of the old sacrificial economy. Particularly is this true of the eminently sacred rites of the paschal lamb, the sin-offering, the day of atonement, and the mercy-seat; all the significance of these elaborate ceremonies turned on the element of blood. Indeed, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, summing up the Old Covenant in respect to ritual, expressly says, "Almost all things are by the law purified with blood; and without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Heb 9:22). The Old Testament is in very truth a scarlet dispensation.

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<sup>16</sup> Milgrom

<sup>17</sup> Robert P. Gordon “Leviticus” New International Bible Commentary Ed by F. F. Bruce et al (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervann Publishing, 1979), 204

2. "To atone for your souls." To atone; literally means to cover, hide, shelter. But in what sense do the atonement comes? It comes in a gracious sense of reconciling by sacrificial, vicarious interception.

3. The reason assigned: "For it is the blood that makes atonement" -- i.e., by the life thereof, in virtue" of the soul in it. It is the blood that atones not, of course, absolutely; for it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away the consciousness of sins. But the blood atones, so to speak, constructively, pictorially, prophetically.<sup>18</sup>

### **ELEMENT OF WORSHIP IN VS 11**

There are four elements of worship recognized from this text. These elements are blood-life, YHWH, altar, priest-congregation. It suffices to note that YHWH is always at the center of worship. He is life and as Yeboah notes 'worship is nothing but assessing life.' So worship is assessing God who is life. When worship is accepted life is released to the worshippers and God's purpose is fulfilled. But when life is not present worship is dead, this is the reason why blood is important in worship, it is used for atonement without the blood there would not be life and when life is no more death would set in.<sup>19</sup>

#### **The first element of worship in this verse is the blood-life.**

The concept of blood is central both to the sacrificial practice of the priesthood and to the theology of the OT at large. The word *dam* itself is connected with the color red. According Vine red *adom* occurs approximately 369 times with its most frequent occurrences in the book of Leviticus 88times. Ezekiel 55times exodus 29 times, Deut 23 times and Psalms 21 times.<sup>20</sup> In the OT, life is clearly expressed as existing within the blood of an organism. In Lev blood is used synonymously with life. In Lev 19:16 where

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<sup>18</sup> Keil and Deischil from *The Biblical Illustrator* 2002, 2003, 2006 Ages Software, Inc. and Biblesoft, Inc.

<sup>19</sup> Yeboah Lecture Notes on Old Testament Themes, June 2011.

<sup>20</sup>L.L. Morris 'Blood' *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 145, here also Morris notes that 'atonement is secured by the death of a victim rather than by its life.' 145.

a prohibition against doing anything that may endanger the life of one's neighbor is to be read literally. In TANAKH it is clearly stated that God gives life and that life is embedded in the blood.<sup>21</sup>

Vicarious sacrifice is mentioned 18 times in the book of Exodus, 6 of which are in relation to the Passover and 4 of which are in relation to the blood covenant made with Israel at Mount Sinai in chapter 24. Moses built an altar and offered upon it burnt and peace offerings. Half of the blood was sprinkled on the altar and the rest upon the people, after they had committed themselves to do and obey the law written in the book. In Leviticus atoning blood occurs about 60 times in relation to the sacrifices, the consecration of the priesthood, and the ritual of the Day of Atonement.<sup>22</sup> Numbers of verbs are used relating to the application of the blood including i) poured out, at the altar (5 times); ii) sprinkled, (12 times); iii) wrung out (twice); iv) offered (once); v) presented (twice). All of these and other procedures in the use of atoning blood are carefully regulated. As an example, we read 'And the priest shall take of the blood of the sin offering with his finger, and put it upon the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and shall pour out all the blood thereof at the bottom of the altar', Lev. 4. 34.

A consideration of the many references to blood in the Old Testament brings to light its importance theologically: the various contexts highlight the different emphases bound up with the term. The following meanings emerge:

1. Blood is life in a healthy body but blood violently removed from the body results in death. This is important in view of the theory that the blood of Christ stands not for His death but rather for His life released through death and thus applied and dedicated to the recovery of men. Bishop Westcott and more recently Vincent Taylor are mainly responsible for popularizing this erroneous idea. The

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<sup>21</sup> Gen. 9. 4; Lev. 17. 11; Deut. 12. 23 NIV

<sup>22</sup> Morris, 145

bible teaches that it is the sacrificial death of Christ, or to put it another way, it is the shedding of His precious blood which is the only way of approach to a Holy God, Heb. 10. 19-20. Atoning blood, Lev. 16. 11, 18; 17. 11; especially Day of Atonement ritual.<sup>23</sup>

2. Blood-letting is permissible in Exod. 12. 13, 23; 13. 13; 1 Pet. 1. 18; Rev. 5. 9.
3. Cleansing, Lev. 14. 14, 49ff; Psa. 51. 7; 1 John 1. 7; Heb. 9. 14; Rev. 1.5; 7. 14.
4. Sanctification, Num. 19. 1-6; Heb. 9. 13.
5. Consecration, a) the priesthood. Exod. 29. 20-21; b) the leper on the 8th day of his cleansing, Lev. 14. 14.
6. The covenant of blood, Exod. 24. 4-8. cf. Gen. 15. 7-21; Jer. 34. 18, 19; Matt. 26. 26-28.

Another element of worship is the Altar. Altar is a place where sacrifices or offerings are made to a deity or divine. The Hebrew equivalent *mizbeah* derives from a verb that denotes the slaughter of animal or the offering of blood sacrifices, signifying the integral covenant between the site and its function.<sup>24</sup> The term is extended in the Pentateuch to include an edifice on which any kind of offering is made. Because altars constitute central elements of the sacrificial cult, much of the priestly legislation in the Pentateuch is concerned with regulating activities associated with them. Altars have always been a place of communion with YHWH, there are at least five symbolic significance of altars.

1. It is a meeting place between God and human beings
2. It is a place where names are ascribed and reinforced as memorial places of worship

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<sup>23</sup> P.E. Hughes 'Blood' *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* Ed by T Desmond Alexandra (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 88-89

<sup>24</sup> L. D. Hawk 'Altars' *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 33-35.

3. It functions as a metaphor in the narrative literature of the Pentateuch. Their significance and sites make them powerful symbols for communicating cosmic and social transitions
4. At the altar the appearance of Yahweh becomes conspicuous, this is noticed especially where Jacob experienced a theophanic appearance of Yahweh at Bethel and erected a pillar to mark the spot. This place became a place of worship  
Gen 28:1-22
5. Altars also make a transition of Israel from a nation of escaped slaves to the covenant people of YHWH

So the value of altars in worship cannot be overlooked. In Lev 17:11, atonement of the congregation takes place at the altars. Altar is central to worship that is why the place should always be consecrated. Although

The third element is the priest *lakem (to you)*. This word is referred to the priest. The priest is the one that leads the worship. The priest directs and performs the sacrifices at the altar. He stands between the congregation and the Lord, he serves as the intermediary. As part of his function, he brings orderliness and decency into worship. He makes sure that worship is properly done in a way that is acceptable to YHWH. His responsibility is to see that the congregations are led to worship God with all reverence and consecration.<sup>25</sup>

The last element is YHWH himself who is the object of worship. YHWH provides full elements of worship in this verse. All these provisions are gifts from YHWH no one provides it. YHWH himself declares it is not that you give the blood to me but I give the blood to you. The implication of this is that YHWH owns everything and whatever he has provided should be used to honor and worship him. Every element

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<sup>25</sup> Hawk, 34.

describes in this worship must be consecrated. YHWH will not take contaminated elements, all contaminated elements must be cleansed and purified. Every element used in worship must be pleasing to him. Any element that does not fit will incur his wrath (See Lev 10:1ff). Once one recognize this to worship God with all one's heart, soul and strength would not be difficult.

## **WORSHIP IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH IN AFRICA**

Churches in the contemporary times tend to adapt to New Testament concept of worship forgetting that the Old Testament concept of worship is the foundation upon which the New Testament is built. Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Although after his resurrection most of the rituals and sacrifices were done away with, but the aspect of reference and genuine worship is retained. Those who worship must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). When the church gathers together to worship, it is the duty of the priest to lead in such worship and everything done must be prescribed by him.

It is unfortunate that worship in contemporary times is not what it should be, the church has lost the sacredness of worship all we see today is noisemaking and gymnastics on the altar. The sacredness of worship has been lost what our leaders do today is to entertain the worshippers and collect offerings from them. They deny this innocent people from experiencing the true worship of God.

When human being worship truly the following will be the consequence

1. They will be transformed.
2. They will have sincere commitment to God.
3. They will be thirsty for a good living
4. They will love God and will want to please him always.

Today, dead formalism has replaced genuine worship of God. Worship is assessing life. This life when presented to God in worship, it averts the state of death which man is and when this transformation is done then worship is accomplished. The New Testament enjoins all believers to come close to the throne of God with a true heart having our heart sprinkled with blood and be made pure from an evil conscience. Worship that will be acceptable today must be

1. Directed towards God
2. Sincere and genuine
3. Fill with love, awe and reverence for God
4. Done in spirit and truth

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has been able to look at Lev 17:11 from the historical and grammatical context and has been able to bring out some of the element of worship embedded in the text for a development of true worship in the contemporary times. The writer notes that true worship exposes our imperfection and God is concerned about us that is why he provides for himself these element of worship that is acceptable to him.

The verse in Lev 17:11 reveals to us what God wants, he wants our life to be a valuable worship to him. He has provided means for the worship, so it is left for the worshippers to worship by being guided by the priest who is to lead in the worship. Worship is what we will do forever. In heaven there is no soul winning, there is sin, scoffing and no teaching in heaven. Kendall notes that in heaven we will all fall prostrate and worship. No one will be self-conscious of who he is in heaven. All what Christians and Jews and people acceptable into the beloved will be doing is worship.

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