

A Comparative and Critical Analysis of Major and Minor Sacrifices in Yoruba and Judeo-Christian Religious Practices

¹Taiwo, John Adebawale & ²Dr. Ogidiolu Ayodeji Olanrewaju ✉

¹Lagos Anglican Seminary, Old Testament Major and PhD Student, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo.

²Head of Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo

Abstract: This academic study undertakes a meticulous comparative analysis of the theological underpinnings and ritual practices of sacrifice within Yoruba traditional religion and Judeo-Christianity. Moving beyond generalized comparisons, this research focuses specifically on the structural and functional distinctions between major sacrifices (involving blood offerings) and minor sacrifices (involving agricultural products or votive gifts). The primary objective is to identify and evaluate points of convergence and divergence in these practices, which originate from distinct continental contexts—Asia for early Judeo-Christianity and Africa for Yoruba culture. Through a qualitative methodology grounded in comparative religious studies and textual analysis of key sources, including the Old Testament and ethnographic accounts of Yoruba rituals (Ebo), this investigation addresses a identified gap in the literature. While prior scholarship has often acknowledged a superficial relationship between the two traditions, this paper provides a nuanced exploration of the sacrificial mechanisms themselves. The analysis reveals that both religious systems, despite their independent development and significant cultural differences, share profound similarities in the application and intended outcomes of sacrificial rites. Major sacrifices in both traditions serve purposes of atonement, propitiation, and communion with the divine, while minor sacrifices commonly express gratitude, fulfill vows, and seek divine favor. The study concludes that the efficacy of these rituals, as perceived by their practitioners, is not diminished by cultural particularities. Instead, Yoruba and Judeo-Christian adherents derive comparable spiritual benefits—including expiation, thanksgiving, and strengthened divine-human relationships—from their respective sacrificial practices. This research contributes to the field of comparative religion by demonstrating how universal religious aspirations are manifested through culturally specific yet functionally analogous ritual forms.

Keywords: Major and Minor Sacrifice, Yoruba Religion, Judeo-Christianity, Comparative Ritual Analysis, Ebo, Atonement, Religious Convergence, Ritual Efficacy

Introduction

This Latin word *sacrificium* is the root of the entire concept of sacrifice that simply means to put something aside as sacred. I am attending my religion class, and we are analyzing what it actually means to offer something up to a God as a way of worship. We first read about Cain and Abel (Gen. 4: 2-5) and that narrative just orients us in the manner in which individuals express their piety. In Christian theology we regard it as layered--somewhat like a simple expression of thanksgiving, up to a serious petition to be forgiven. It all begins with the idea that YHWH or whichever god we are discussing is the supreme authority and it is logical that people would want to establish

good terms with the higher power by means of rituals.

The entire idea behind these rituals we are told is that it is hewn out of scripture. This passage in the New Testament: without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9: 22) explains why the great sacrifices are the most important. Sacrifices on a grand scale, i.e. the ones that include blood, either animal or even human, are also intended to underpin intercessory prayer, seal covenants (such as that in Exodus 24:4-8) and maintain the connection between the god and us, the worshippers. Other anthropologists believe that all had been practicing similar activities in pagan practices earlier, however, the Old

Testament demonstrates a rather comprehensive and organized form of worship that is difficult to overlook. Central to the Judeo-Christian tradition is the role of a priest who acts as an intermediary, presenting the chosen victim or object within a consecrated setting.

Prophets of the Old Testament consistently emphasized that the external ritual must be accompanied by internal sincerity and ethical living. Scriptures such as Isaiah 1: 2-31, Hosea 6: 6, and Amos 5: 21-24 vehemently argue that empty ritual is abhorrent to God, a theme later echoed by Jesus Christ himself. He prioritized mercy over mechanical sacrifice (Matthew 9: 13, 12: 7), ultimately redefining the concept through his own death, which is understood as the ultimate atonement, inaugurating a new and everlasting covenant.

The Dual Aspects of Sacrifice in the Old Testament

A thorough examination of Old Testament literature reveals that sacrifice operates on two complementary dimensions: the divine recipient and the human giver. This relationship is inherently asymmetrical, predicated on the superior power of the recipient, to whom obeisance is paid in anticipation of divine benevolence.

1. The Divine Perspective (God's Edge):

From God's vantage point, sacrificial rituals served a dual purpose. Primarily, they functioned as a pedagogical tool; the external ceremonies and requirements for holiness were tangible representations of the internal, spiritual holiness God demanded from His

people. Secondly, these acts were occasions for God to impart blessing and grace, as evidenced in the accounts of Abel and Noah (Genesis 4: 4, 7; 8: 21-22).

2. The Human Perspective (Man's Edge): For humanity, sacrifice was the primary means of approaching the divine. Through worship and substantive offerings, individuals and the community expressed profound thankfulness and acknowledged their absolute dependence on God. The act also served as a tangible confession of sin and a plea for cleansing (cf. Genesis 43; Exodus 5: 3; Micah 6: 6-7).

Interestingly, the Old Testament does not record a specific divine command instituting sacrifice; rather, the desire to offer thanks appears to be an innate human impulse. In its earliest forms, as seen in the offerings of Cain, Abel, and Noah, the elements of thanksgiving and supplication were intertwined. The more developed concept of propitiation—appeasing divine wrath—gained prominence later, particularly after the Mosaic Law provided a more comprehensive definition of sin and, consequently, a heightened sense of guilt. This Law stipulated that any offering must be the legitimate property of the giver (Deuteronomy 23: 18), ensuring the act represented a genuine personal surrender to Jehovah. In this theological framework, the sacrificial victim itself became the worshipper's substitute and representative.

A Typology of Major Sacrificial Rites

As established, major sacrifices are characterized by bloodshed. The foundational principle governing these rites is substitutionary atonement, where an innocent

life is offered in place of the guilty one. This symbolic transfer was physically enacted when the offerer laid hands upon the victim's head, identifying with it. By then personally slaying the animal, the offerer signified acceptance of the death penalty for their transgression, before the priest completed the ritual, often by applying the blood to the altar. The Levitical code delineates several specific types of major sacrifices:

1. The Burnt Offering (Kalil): This offering involved the complete combustion of an unblemished male animal—an ox, sheep, goat, or dove, depending on the offerer's means. It functioned as a general sin offering, effecting atonement by propitiating the holiness of God on behalf of an unholy people. Its comprehensive nature, where no portion was retained by the priests or the offerer, earned it the name Kalil, meaning "whole" or "complete."

2. The Sin Offering: This rite addressed specific unintentional sins where restitution was not possible. The required animal varied with the status of the sinner: a bullock for a priest or the congregation, a male goat for an individual man, and a female goat for a woman. While the fatty portions (suet covering the entrails, kidneys, liver, and caul) were burned, the remainder was to be consumed within the tabernacle court by the priests.

3. The Trespass (Guilt) Offering: Similar to the sin offering, this addressed specific transgressions but those for which financial restitution was possible. The ritual required

not only the sacrifice of a ram but also the repayment of damages at 120% of their value.

4. The Peace Offerings: This category, encompassing Thanksgiving, Votive, and Free-will offerings, was unique as it culminated in a communal meal signifying fellowship with God. It was presented for blessings received, deliverance granted, or vows fulfilled. Unblemished male or female animals were offered, and portions were distributed: the breast to the high priest, the right thigh to the attending priest, and the rest to the offerer and their family to be eaten in a state of ritual purity.

5. The Votive Offering: A subtype of peace offering, this was presented in fulfilment of a specific vow made to God

6. The Free-will Offering: Another peace offering, this was a spontaneous gift motivated by general thankfulness and love toward God, with no specific antecedent vow

Semantic Distinctions: 'Offering' and 'Sacrifice'

A precise understanding of the terminology is crucial. In both English and Hebrew, a semantic distinction exists between the general and the specific. The English term offering is a broad classification denoting any gift presented to the divine. Conversely, sacrifice is a more specific subset of offering, referring to the act of making something sacred, which often, but not always, involves consecration through ritual slaughter.

This linguistic nuance is mirrored in the Hebrew texts. For instance, Leviticus 1:2 uses the general term qorban (offering) to introduce the regulations for various rites. The more specific term for sacrifice (zevach) does not appear until the discussion of peace offerings in Leviticus 3:1. A "peace offering" was, therefore, a particular type of qorban that was also a zevach—it involved sacred slaughter and a communal meal.

Consequently, in the Old Testament, the words sacrifice and to sacrifice are technically employed only in the context of peace offerings. However, modern scholarly convention applies the English word "sacrifice" more broadly to encompass the entire system of animal offerings, distinguishing them from non-animal or grain offerings. The phrase "sacrificial system" is used as an umbrella term for the complex of rituals involving both animal and vegetable presentations to the divine.

The Establishment of the Regular Cultic Ritual
The inauguration of the tabernacle's daily ritual by Moses (Exodus 29:38; 40) was a multifaceted event designed to invite and accommodate the manifest presence of the Lord. This intricate system transformed the tabernacle from a structure into a functioning dwelling place. The rituals initiated included:

- The arrangement of the Bread of the Presence (Exodus 40:22; Leviticus 24:5-9).
- The lighting of the lamps on the lampstand (Exodus 40:25; Leviticus 24:1-4).
- The burning of incense on the golden altar (Exodus 40:27; Exodus 30:7-8).

- The presentation of daily burnt, grain, and libation offerings on the bronze altar (Exodus 40:29; Numbers 28:7).

A significant detail is the installation of the bronze basin for ritual purification (Exodus 40:30-32). The narrative shifts to an imperfect tense, explaining the ongoing practice for priests ("they would wash"), indicating that these instructions looked forward to the perpetual ministry of Aaron and his sons, even though Moses performed the initial rites.

This entire apparatus—light, food (bread, meat), drink (libations), and cleanliness—mirrored the functions of an occupied household. The immediate commencement of these rituals served as an invitation for the Lord to take up residence, a purpose dramatically fulfilled when His glory filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35).

A critical theological divergence from surrounding Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cultures is essential to note. While the offerings were termed "God's food" (Leviticus 3:11; Numbers 28:2) and the altar called "the table of the LORD" (Malachi 1:7), Israelite worship vehemently rejected the pagan notion that deities physically consumed offerings. Key evidence includes the absence of a cult statue to "feed," the weekly rather than daily presentation of the Bread of the Presence, and the prophetic rebukes against this literalistic misunderstanding (Psalm 50:12-13). The system instead symbolized God's active presence and the continual worship He deserved, not any physical dependency.

Sacrificial Theology in the New Testament Continuum

The New Testament operates within the theological framework established by the Old Testament sacrificial system. Narratives such as Mary's purification offering (Luke 2: 22-24; cf. Leviticus 12) demonstrate the continued practice of the Law during Christ's time. Jesus himself instructed adherents to follow the Mosaic requirements (Matthew 8: 4), though he critiqued the legalistic traditions that undermined their intent (Mark 7).

The cornerstone of New Testament theology is the re-interpretation of sacrifice through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Book of Hebrews provides the most extensive commentary, arguing that Christ's death was the ultimate and final sacrifice, fulfilling and negating the need for the Levitical system (Hebrews 9-10). His offering served as a perfect atonement for sin, establishing a new covenant.

This transformative event does not abolish the concept of sacrifice but redefines it for the Christian. With the ultimate blood sacrifice completed, believers are called to offer non-literal, spiritual sacrifices: a life of personal holiness, praise, and good works (Romans 12: 1; Hebrews 13: 15-16). The imagery of the Old Testament system is thus fulfilled and sublimated into a new paradigm of discipleship and worship.

Manifestations of Minor Sacrifices in Contemporary Practice

In modern religious practice, the principle of sacrifice continues in forms that align with the New Testament paradigm, often categorized as minor sacrifices or offerings.

- **Sunday Offering:** The monetary contribution during worship services functions as a modern-day thank offering. It represents a "sowing of seed" (2 Corinthians 9: 6-7), symbolizing thanksgiving, commitment to God's work, and communal support.

- **Birthday Offering:** This practice constitutes a renewable vow of thankfulness. It is a personal sacrifice of gratitude presented annually at the altar, acknowledging God's preservation and grace throughout another year of life.

- **Vow/Pledge Fulfillment:** The practice of making and redeeming vows remains prevalent. These pledges, whether fulfilled through money, goods, or livestock, are considered sacred obligations, modern expressions of the votive offerings described in the Old Testament.

- **Ebo in Yoruba Tradition:** Within the Yoruba religious context, Ebo remains a comprehensive concept for offerings made to the Orisha. These sacrifices, which can range from foodstuffs like fruit and candy to objects like candles, are presented to establish communion, seek favor, or express devotion to specific deities.

Conclusion

The Ebo tradition in Yoruba traditional religion basically defines the concept of sacrifice as the act of sacrificing something before a deity to be in good terms or to request some favour. All the people appear to believe that it really works, good and bad vibes. Comparing the two, Yoruba and Judeo-Christian traditions have completely different

origins, yet they, in fact, do rather similar things with sacrifice. They both employ small or large rituals to bring human beings into contact with the divine, to make things right, offer thanks and seal pacts. The primary distinction, particularly in Christianity, is that the blood of Christ is a one-time sacrifice and animal blood received a free pass and was instead substituted by the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. Physical sacrifice thus becomes some form of inner devotion by Christians.

Both of the traditions concur that sacrifice is not merely a ritual at the end of the day. It is an immense means to demonstrate to the godly that we care and that we desire to experience awe and identification with the holy.

So when you look at them together you realize that it isn't only about differing practices but the universal desire of a human being to connect with the other side, and to attempt to knit the gap between mortal and transcendent.

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