



A soteriological reflection on priestly Christology from an Akan perspective

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Abstract

The priesthood of Christ forms a key foundation upon which Christian soteriology is built. In the Akan traditional community where priesthood is a common religious institution, a proper understanding of the soteriological significance of Christ's priesthood has the potential of making the Christian faith more relevant and meaningful. Nonetheless, there is inadequate scholarly attention given to this subject from an Akan perspective. This literature-based research was, therefore, conducted to contribute to the scholarly discourse about Christian soteriology by exploring how Akan traditional priestly tradition might enhance the Akan Christian understanding of the nature and relevance of Christ's priesthood and sacrifice based on a theological study of Hebrews 9:11–14. This text has been chosen because it gives a clear expression the biblical perspective on the priestly sacrifice of Christ. As a work in the area of Christian theology, the article does not provide detailed exegesis of the text but explores theological themes that are relevant for the Akan appreciation of the priesthood of Christ. The main argument is that since the atonement of Christ is sufficient for holistic salvation, there can be no legitimate sacrifice for salvific purposes in any society. The article contributes to the contextualization of Christian theology in the Akan/African society.

Keywords

Akan; Christianity; priesthood; priestly Christology

Introduction

Christianity in African has experienced huge numerical growth in the past and present centuries, moving from 9% Christian population in

1900 to nearly 50% Christian population in 2020 (Zurlo 2020). With this unprecedented growth comes the challenge of ensuring a corresponding qualitative growth. Ensuring a qualitative growth of the church in Africa requires sound theological formulation and effective discipleship. In the process, the contextualization of the Christian gospel is indispensable (Turaki 2020:5–8). A successful contextualization requires the establishment of links between the Christian faith and the worldview of the community in which the theological discourse is taking place. In the process, one has to guard against syncretism.

For the Akan community of Ghana (the context of the study), the contextualization of the doctrine of the atonement of Christ has the potential of making Christian soteriology better understood and appreciated (Takyi 2015:39–40). Atoning sacrifices abound in Akan traditional religious thought and practices as means of maintaining harmony between the natural and the supernatural realms. A proper understanding of the Christian concept of atonement will not only give assurance of salvation but will also encourage Akan Christians to appreciate the qualitative superiority of the Christ-event to any activity undertaken by any leader of Akan primal religion. Yet, there is inadequate scholarly attention paid to this doctrine, especially in relation to the Akan context and the epistle to the Hebrews.

The need to intensify the discourses on atonement for the Akan Christian community has prompted this study which focuses on how a theological study of Hebrews 9:11–14 might encourage Akan Christians to focus on Christ as the only legitimate mediator in the God-human relationship. By appreciating the sufficiency of the atonement of Christ for holistic salvation, Akan Christians will be encouraged to trust only Jesus for their physical and spiritual needs such as prosperity, longevity, protection, and power, among others. This will inevitably yield qualitative growth in Christianity in the Akan community.

With the above introductory notes, the article proceeds to examine the background of Hebrews 9:11–14 which is followed by a close theological of the text.

Background of Hebrews 9:11–14

Biblical scholarship has not succeeded in identifying the author of Hebrews (DeSilva 2016:625; Thompson 2008:4). While the actual date of writing is unknown, it is generally believed that Hebrews was written before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70 because of the author's references to the Levitical sacrifices as still functioning (cf. Heb. 10:2–3) (DeSilva 2016:626). Powell (2009:431) identifies the audience as a predominantly Jewish community or people who had greatly been influenced by the Jewish religion. Among other reasons, the book was written to caution the audience to desist from beliefs and practices that are contrary to Christianity, particularly those that stem from Judaism (Powell 2009:431).

The letter to the Hebrews begins as a well-crafted oration, without key features of New Testament epistles (such as salutation, name of author and identity of the audience) but ends in a typically epistolary manner, with a benediction, personal remarks, and a final farewell (13:18–25) (DeSilva 2016:625). The author exhibits high rhetorical skills and other literary features like complex periodic sentences (1:1–4; 2:2–4; 5:7–10; 7:26–28), alliteration (cf. 1:1), internal rhyme (5:8), metaphors taken from the law courts (cf. 6:16; 7:7), athletics (12:1–2), education (5:11–14) and anaphora (11:3–39).

Of the many Christological themes covered in Hebrews, this article focuses on the priestly Christology (as presented in 9:11–14). Prior to this text, the author had demonstrated that the Old Covenant anticipated a better Covenant (8:7–13). He contends that the relationship between the Old and New Covenants is that of a copy to pattern, shadow to reality, or type to antitype. The author then proceeds to chapter 9 and presents a discussion on “the ministry of Christ as high priest in the heavenly sanctuary, interlacing covenant, sanctuary, priest, and sacrifice, with the accent on the sacrifice of Christ” (Purdy 1955:684). In chapter 9:1–10, the author contends that the Old Covenant failed to give worshippers access to God. This prepares the reader for the contrast with the entrance of Christ into the heavenly Most Holy Place, where God dwells forever (vv. 11–14). This is followed by the presentation of Christ as the mediator of the New Covenant (v. 15ff). The freedom that the atonement offers Christians from sin and the place of

blood in the ritual enactment of a covenant are also considered (vv. 15–22). This contextual analysis will guide the theological reading of the text in the next section.

A theological reading of the text

Superiority of the heavenly sanctuary (v. 11)

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation). (NRSV).

In verse 11, the author shifts theological attention to what Christ has achieved through his priestly ministry, presenting a balance between the precedents of redemption (discussed in the preceding text) with the description of redemption itself in the present text (Cockerill 2012:387). Earlier, the writer had described the sacrifices of the Old Covenant as both repetitious and incapable of providing access to God (cf. 9:1–10). The Levitical sacrificial system required the high priest to offer sacrifices on his own and the people’s behalf (9:7). The high priest went to the Most Holy Place in the Jewish Temple annually to atone for the sins of the entire community (cf. Lev. 16:1–28). The weaknesses that were associated with the old priestly order, including the imperfect nature of the priestly order, the mortality and sinfulness of the human priests, the repetitive nature of the sacrifice made and the unsuitability of animals to die in the stead of humans necessitated the establishment of a new priestly order (Craigie 2001:953; cf. Jer. 31:31–34). The Old Covenant sacrifices compare well with Akan traditional sacrifices which are offered over and over again by human priests. Akan traditional priests offer sacrifices to spiritual entities during festivals and special days (Takyi 2015:45; Brempong 2006). An Akan festival cannot be held without the necessary atoning sacrifice(s). Daily sacrifices, weekly and monthly sacrifices are also made by heads of family in some Akan communities. These sacrifices are primarily meant to foster peaceful co-existence between then physical world and the spiritual realm.

The text under consideration associates Christ’s priesthood with “the good things that are to come”, meaning, he is the high priest of all the blessings that were to come from the perspective of those who lived in

the Old Testament era (Omanson 2012:460). In other words, Christ is the fulfilment of the anticipations of the ultimate benefit of priesthood that was instituted in the Old Testament. The “good things” may also be considered in the eschatological sense as what lie in the future for believers during the Second Coming of Christ (cf. Isa. 52:7). It may also refer to the messianic age, and so what the author of Hebrews might be saying is that Christ’s atonement has ushered in the messianic age (Ekem 2005:100). One may say, in the priesthood of Christ, eschatological good things have arrived. Yet, these good things will not be realized fully until the Kingdom is fully established in the age to come (Schreiner 2015:266; Cockerill 2012:390). Thus, the cross and all the benefits it brings to the believer are both now and yet to come. This means that a proper understanding of the cross must be two-dimensional, emphasizing its significance both in this world and in the world to come. This understanding of the cross, and for that matter Christian soteriology, needs to be emphasized in any well-balanced theological formulation.

The superiority of Christ does not only relate to the benefits of his salvific work but also to the sanctuary in which he ministers. Christ, the exalted high priest, has passed through the greater and more perfect tent to give believers access to God which they previously did not have (9:8). Therefore, believers now have “access to the heavenly sanctuary because the high priest has gone through the curtain (10:19–20) that separates heaven and earth” and can “now draw near to God because their pioneer (2:10) and forerunner has entered behind the curtain, becoming the high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (6:20) and the source of eternal salvation (5:9)” (Thompson 2008:186).

The description of the sanctuary of Jesus’ priesthood as “greater and more perfect tent” alludes to the theological fact that the tabernacle in which he works is neither physical nor transient (cf. 1:10–12; 8:13) but one that is invisible (11:1) and unshakable (12:27) and “made by God” (9:11) (Bourke 2011:936). Theologians are divided as to whether the “tent” refers to the risen body of Christ or heavenly regions through which Jesus passed (Bourke 2011:936). The resurrected-body view is supported by the fact that Christ’s body could not be described as “not of this creation” only after the resurrection. It is the resurrection that made Christ’s body a heavenly one (cf. 1 Cor. 15:46–47). The second position is also supported by the

fact that the heavenly sanctuary contrasts the earthly one and is not part of “this creation” (Bourke 2011:936; Cockerill 2012:393). One may argue that the writer of Hebrews is here employing the *Yom Kippur* imagery of the Levitical high-priestly ritual (cf. LXX Lev. 16:2), which involves the movement into the inner sanctuary through the curtain to the mercy seat, to develop a transience-permanence motif. Therefore, while “tent” is to be understood as the actual heavenly region through which Christ (being the high priest) passes to enter the Holy Sanctuary, one must not consider this region as the visible heavens, because the latter is created and perishable (Heb. 1:11) while “the tent” (in the present text) is non-created and imperishable (9:11). Yet, strictly speaking there is no tent in the heavenly region (Schreiner, 2015:266). In the New Testament, there is no need for a heavenly Holy Place because Christ brings to believers the very presence of God (Schreiner 2015:266). Therefore, the concept of “tent” is only employed to communicate the idea of being in the presence of God.

Superiority of the blood of Jesus (v. 12)

He entered once for all into the holy place, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

The text continues to say that Christ “entered once for all into the Holy Place.” Here, the author builds on the previous verse by arguing for both the time quality and the intrinsic quality of the atoning sacrifice of Christ (Ekem 2005:103). The expression “once-for-all” means “one time for all times,” not “one time for all people” and it highlights the ultimate effectiveness of Christ’s blood. Christ’s superiority is attested by the way he replaces the repetitious sacrifices of the Old Covenant with his one-time sacrifice on the cross (Cockerill 2012:394). This, according to Morris (1981:86), points to the decisive nature of the death of Christ or the finality of Christ’s atonement.

Aside entering the sanctuary once-for-all, the means by which Christ entered the sanctuary is qualitatively superior to that of the Akan or Old Testament priest. Unlike the Akan or Old Testament priest, Christ entered the “Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood.” This became necessary because the blood of animals could not attain redemption. The blood of Christ accomplished salvation to the fullest. The necessity of offering blood is highlighted in Hebrews 9:18 and 22. The text

draws on the Old Testament practice where the priest after shedding the blood on the altar, carried it into the Most Holy Place (Lev. 16). In both Old and New Testaments, “blood” often signifies “life,” especially “life violently destroyed,” therefore involving “death” (as in Heb. 12:4). Given this understanding, one reasons that the reference to Jesus’s blood in this verse (and in v. 14) alludes to his death on the cross (Hughes 1987:336). The shedding of blood is the offering of one’s life because blood carries a person’s life (cf. Lev. 17:11).

Christ, unlike any human priest, entered the sanctuary by means of his own blood, referring to his death on the cross, which is the sacrifice of the New Covenant equivalent to the animal sacrifices offered under the Old Covenant. Christ, therefore, serves both as the offeror and the offering, the sinless and perfect high priest (Heb. 4:15; 7:26) and the spotless sacrifice in the New Covenant. The idea that Christ offered his own blood on the heavenly altar in the heavenly sanctuary should not be understood as Christ going to some heavenly sanctuary with his blood after his death, and then offering it to God. Christ actually completed his atoning work (through the shedding of his blood) on the cross and so did not ascend to heaven with any sacrifice (Morris 1981:86; Thompson 2008:186; Cockerill 2012:394). The fact that he did not enter “with” his blood but “by means of” his blood underlines this idea.

The superiority of Christ’s sacrifice is further expressed in the fact that his sacrifice purchased “an eternal redemption.” The word “eternal” carries two main ideas – “not needing to be repeated” (as in 7:27) and “transcending this world” (cf. v. 11b); “redemption” refers to the act of setting one free through the payment of a price (cf. Rom. 3:25). Here, sin is depicted as having oppressive power from which one has to be redeemed. The text contrasts the death of Christ with the provisional nature of what the Old Covenant sacrificial system (or Akan traditional sacrifices) accomplished through the blood of animals. The eternal redemption attainable by the once-and-for-all sacrifice characterizes Christ’s death on the cross. A perfect ransom has been paid for human redemption through Christ’s death and because it does not need to be paid again and again, the redemption obtained is described as eternal (Hodges 1983:801). Therefore, “The superiority of Christ’s accomplishment is thus both qualitative (intrinsic) and temporal (time-transcending)” (Hagner 2011:np). Clearly, the value of

Christ's sacrifice far outweighs the value of animal sacrifice in the Levitical tradition or in any human society, including the Akan community. This fact leads to the subject of the next section on the soteriological inferiority of the blood of animals.

Inferiority of the blood of animals (vv. 13–14)

For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified,¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

In verses 13 and 14, the biblical author proves the superiority of Christ's sacrifice as he/she once again returns to the Levitical system to provide the lens for interpretation. The "bull" recalls the "young (male) bullock" which Aaron had to offer as a sin offering for himself and his family (Lev. 16:3). In the Akan context, the "bull" refers to any object used for atoning purposes. The main argument in verse 13 is that the Old Testament ritual, involving "the blood of goats and bulls" (cf. Lev. 16:15–16) and the aspersion of sinners with "ashes of a heifer"—which were mixed with water to make "the water of cleansing ... for the purification from sin" (Num. 19:9, 14–21)—achieved purification for the Israelites only at the external level. That is, the aspersion with the blood of the sacrifices and the lustral water only achieved external purity for the defiled, not moral purity. The Old Testament sprinkling ritual was meant to put people back into a state in which they could once again legally partake the temple worship (Cockerill 2012:396). Strictly speaking, this practice could not take away sin (cf. Heb. 10:4). The actual cleansing of humankind from sin required the shedding of the blood of the Son of God.

In verse 14, the biblical author highlights the incomparable greatness of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. Christ's sacrifice is described as "without blemish" or "perfect" alluding to Numbers 19:2 (cf. 1 Pet. 1:18–19) where "perfect" signifies that the sacrificial victim must have no defect, else it cannot be used as a sacrifice. Christ was perfect, unblemished and without sin (cf. Heb. 2:8; 1 John 3:5). The last part of the verse focuses on the reality that incomparably superior "blood of Christ" brings to humanity which the Old Testament religious cleansing tradition only foreshadowed,

namely, the purification of human “conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” “The blood of Christ” signifies his sacrificial death on the cross (Allen 2010:473) and the word “conscience” signifies the heart or the innermost part of a person (Schreiner 2015:272). The human conscience is the point at which someone confronts God’s holiness. As such, one becomes disqualified from serving God when his/her conscience is defiled.

The author’s point is that the power of Christ’s blood has qualified those – who were disqualified by their defiled conscience – to serve God. In other words, through cleansing by Jesus’s blood, believers have had their consciences purified from all that defiles humanity and have been liberated from the past life of sin’s dominion to a new life characterized by spirit-rule (Lane 1991:176). The author says in Hebrews 9:9–10 that the Old Testament ceremonial laws could not “perfect the conscience of the worshiper”, but merely dealt with food, ceremonial washings, and other regulations that were imposed on the body while looking forward to the time of a new order. The writer now sees this new order in the ministry of Christ. The cleansing of the conscience frees the worshiper from the guilt of his/her past sins. Therefore, Luther (cited in Allen 2010:473) is right to assert that in the new order a person “is not bitten by the recollection of his sins and is not disquieted by the fear of future punishment” because Christ’s sacrifice offers expiation, in cleansing sinners from their sins and their consciences from dead works.

With the above theological exposition, the article proceeds to examine the subject of atonement in the Akan traditional religious-cultural setting.

Salvation in Akan context

The Akan ethnolinguistic group is the largest ethnic group in Ghana, comprising many autonomous sub-groups with closely related economic, political, social, religious, and cultural institutions. Historians trace the root of the Akan to the Sahel from where they migrated to establish the Bonoman kingdom around the 12th century, with Bono-Manso as its capital from where some groups migrated to different locations to establish different Akan states (Ankrah 2018:59).

The religious belief of the Akan comprises the belief in *Nyankopɔn* (God), who is the Creator and the Sustainer of the universe. *Nyankopɔn* is so powerful that no one can approach him directly; therefore, the Akan approach him through various intermediaries, including ancestors and lower divinities (Takyi 2015:40). The ancestors are the spirits of death people who lived exemplary lives, died naturally at a ripe age and now live peacefully in the realm of the dead (Sarpong 1974:35). It is also believed that *Nyankopɔn* created lower divinities to serve him. The Akan also hold belief in (malevolent and benevolent) spirits which inhabit various natural object such as the sea, trees, rocks, and mountains, among others (Takyi 2015:42). For the Akan to enjoy fullness of life, there must be harmony between the physical and the spiritual realms. Being limited and vulnerable at the bottom of the hierarchy of powers, the Akan naturally seeks for a “saviour” to help them enjoy fullness of life (Takyi 2015:39).

The Akan term for salvation is *nkwagyee* which derives from *nkwa* (or life) and *gye* (to rescue, save, deliver, redeem). *Nkwagyee*, therefore, refers to the act of delivering a person, family or community from misfortune, a deadly disease, a disgraceful situation, or any life-threatening condition. The one who facilitates *nkwagyee* is *agyenkwa* or *nkwagyefoɔ* (saviour). The Akan need an *agyenkwa* to deal adequately with any forces that can hinder their life and health progress. The fact is rooted in the Akan belief that the physical world is controlled by the spiritual world (Asante 2014:57). Salvation in the Akan worldview includes getting answers to the concrete realities or physical and immediate threats to individual or communal existence and enjoyment of life in all its fullness (Asante 2014:57). Salvation includes good health, wealth, prosperity, and longevity.

Salvation in Akan religious thought must deal with the problem of sin. Sin in Akan worldview has a communal dimension. The social or horizontal dimension of sin in the Akan worldview is expressed in the dictum, “I am related by blood; therefore I exist.” Accordingly, in the Akan worldview, sin affects not only the individual sinner but also the community as a whole. Sin brings disharmony between the physical and the spiritual world. Pobe (1979:111) therefore rightly says “sin is an act, motivation, or conduct which is directed against the *sensus communis*, the social harmony and the personal achievement sanctioned by the traditional code.” Salvation then is the process by which sin, which destroys the relationship between

humanity and God, ancestors, and other spiritual entities, is taken away in order to facilitate reconciliation. The communal dimension of salvation in Akan thought contrasts any individualistic-dominated interpretation of the biblical concept of salvation. In the biblical context, salvation is both individualist and communal in that the salvation of individuals leads the formation of a community of believers, the church. Therefore, it is proper to have a balanced soteriological view where the individual and communal aspects are both given attention.

Atonement in Akan worldview

In their attempt to maintain good relationship with the supernatural, the Akan perform many sacrifices. At the centre of the Akan traditional sacrifices is the *kɔmfɔɔ* (traditional priest) whose mediation between the physical and the spiritual worlds enhances his/her people's chances of enjoying fullness of life. Like the Old Testament priests, Akan traditional priests are the custodians of the sacred spaces, the officiants of sacrifices and the spiritual timekeepers responsible for prompting and announcing sacred seasons and how they should be observed. The priest acts as an intermediary between *Nyankopɔn* and the people, performs ritual sacrifices on behalf of the community, and serves as the custodian of communal customs, knowledge and wisdom, taboos and the history and general culture of the society (Quarcoopome 1987:76-77).

The Akan desire to maintain an excellent relationship with the supernatural world is achieved through sacrifices which include thanksgiving, communion, foundation, preventive, votive, propitiatory and substitutionary sacrifices (Quarcoopome 1987:91-92; Awoniyi 2015:68-69). With regards to atonement, the propitiatory and substitutionary sacrifices are the most important in the Akan religious setting. The propitiatory sacrifice is offered to gods and spirits in times of calamities like famine, epidemic, calamity, floods, drought and others threaten the security of the society as a result of the anger of the gods and spirits against the community (Quarcoopome 1987:92; Awoniyi, 2015:68). The substitutionary sacrifice is given on behalf of a person who should have suffered privation, discomfort or even death (Quarcoopome 1987:91).

In the case of the substitutionary sacrifice, the sacrificial victim (usually a sheep, a goat or a fowl) loses its life for the beneficiary to avoid the consequences of his/her own sinful action by dying in the person's stead. The carcass of such sacrificial victim is not eaten; it is buried. It is as if the carcass carried the calamity for which the sacrifice was made and so eating it might transfer the calamity to the person who enjoys it. The transfer of the calamity to the sacrificial victim is done symbolically either by scratching the animal with the sinner or through the laying on of hands as in the case of the goat of *Azazel* in the *Yom Kippur* ritual (cf. Lev. 16:20–22) or the case of the Chagga people of Tanzania who transfer calamities to their sacrificial victims by spitting onto it before sending it into the wilderness to perish (Mojola 1999:69). In Africa/Akan, animals for atoning sacrifices need to be chosen carefully to avoid being rejected by the gods/ancestors. According to Ngewa (2006:1529) the sacrificial animal must be obtained honourably (that is, not a stolen animal), must be of a uniform colour, and be free from defect. Normally, after the atoning sacrifice is made and the gods or ancestors are satisfied, they reverse the calamitous situation in which the offeror find themselves or that was about to befall the offeror. How significant is Christ's priesthood for the salvation of the Akan? The next section elaborates on this question.

Soteriological reflections from an Akan perspective

Christ fulfils the Akan desire for a perfect priest

The importance of sacrifices in Akan Traditional Religion prepares Akan Christians to appreciate Christ's sacrifice on the cross. It is important to state that the Akan have no traditional priest or shrine dedicated to *Nyankopɔn* because they consider no human as righteous enough to mediate the relationship with God (Takyi, 2015:45). This is the main reason why they reach God through such intermediaries as lower divinities and ancestors. The religious vacuum created by the lack of a qualified human being to mediate the divine-human relationship is filled by Christ – who being a perfect human – being qualifies to represent humankind before God and being God qualifies as the perfect sacrifice to atone for human sins. Christ then should be considered as the perfect human priest that the Akan society has yearned for since its history began.

Before Christ's ultimate sacrifice, some Old Testament foreshadows were given through the Levitical priestly order. Similarly, before the introduction of Christianity into the Akan community, the Akan relied on sacrifices to the supernatural entities to establish and maintain harmonious living with the spiritual world. From the theological study above, Jesus's sacrifice comes as the fulfilment of God's plan for salvation which he (God) had put in place before creation but only made manifest at the right time according to his own plan (9:11-14; cf. Rom. 5:6). The fact that Christ has fulfilled the religious vacuum in Akan should encourage Akan Christians to look up to him alone as the only legitimate and efficient priest to carry their petitions to God and to mend their broken relationship with God.

Christ's atonement is qualitatively superior to any Akan sacrifice

Concerning the relationship between Akan/African traditional sacrifices and Christ's sacrifice, Tlhagale (1995:58) argues that traditional sacrifices are offered metaphorically to make special requests such as good health, well-being, peace, reconciliation, favour, and others, while Christ's sacrifice is the true sacrifice that achieves redemption for humanity. Tlhagale is right in noting that only Christ's sacrifice achieves atonement in the true sense of the word. However, (as the I argue later) Christ's sacrifice goes beyond the redemption of the soul to bringing other benefits such as good health, reconciliation, peace, among others, to believers. This makes Tlhagale's position on the purpose of Christ's sacrifice theologically inappropriate. In the author's view, Akan sacrifices are in a way similar to the Old Testament typological provision which was made to deal with defilement that came as a result of sin. In the same way that the Old Testament sacrifices could not provide atonement in the true sense, so Akan sacrifices could not and/or cannot achieve atonement for the worshipper. However, the Old Testament atoning sacrifices were sanctioned by God and dedicated to him alone unlike Akan sacrifices which are neither explicitly sanctioned by God nor received by him (alone).

An important distinction between traditional sacrifice and Christ's sacrifice is the fact that Christ is both the sacrificial victim and the priest who offers the sacrifice. In both the Levitical and Akan traditional sacrificial systems, the priest is distinct from the sacrificial victim. Hence, on the cross, Christ combines what were two distinct parties in both the

Levitical and Akan traditional sacrificial traditions (that is, the priest and the sacrifice). Again, Christ's sacrifice was made to God, not to lesser gods and ancestral spirits as is the case in Akan primal religion. The concept of making an offering to the Supreme Being through intermediaries (such as lower deities and ancestors) has no place in Christian theology and must give way to the idea that God is the only legitimate Receiver of all sacrifices and must be approached only through Christ (the only legitimate Mediator between God and humankind).

Furthermore, unlike Akan traditional sacrifices, Christ's sacrifice occurred in a universal plane to affect all humanity. It is not restricted to a particular group of people or a particular region. This is what the writer of Hebrews means when he says Christ's priesthood required him to pass through a heavenly tabernacle that is greater, perfect and unperishable (cf. 9:11). The writer further underlines the time and intrinsic qualities of Christ's sacrifice by highlighting that he (Christ) went into the Holy of Holies once and for all by means of his own blood in contrast to the Levitical high priests who entered the Holy Place every year with the blood of animals like goats and calves. By extension, what Christ did also contrasts what Akan traditional priest do by way of sacrifices. While hanging on the cross, Christ offered his life as a sacrifice to God to deal with human sin (becoming the Lamb of God that takes the sin of the world away; cf. John 1:29). This once-for-all sacrifice accomplished in reality what no Akan traditional sacrifice could not achieve or has the potency to achieve. It is only Christ's sacrifice that provides salvation. No traditional sacrifice can atone for sin and provide worshippers with the means to have eternal life.

Christ's sacrifice fulfils the Akan need for atonement

The finality of Jesus's sacrifice addresses the Akan need for a permanent sacrifice to deal with their sin once-for-all. Rather than using Akan repetitious sacrifices or primal religious sacrifices as a means of atoning for sin, Akan Christians should embrace God's ordained means of dealing with human sin through the Christ's vicarious and substitutionary sacrifice. Clearly, all sacrifices that preceded or follow Christ's sacrifice are inferior and not capable of attaining atonement in the strict sense of the word. Regarding the Old Testament, it may be argued that God used this system as a teaching aid to facilitate human understanding of Christ's

sacrifice which was to come at the right time as the only acceptable and real sacrifice that truly redeems humanity from sin's dominion. Thus, in the Akan context, traditional sacrifices may be considered as pedagogical tools for helping Akan Christians to appreciate the nature and significance of Christ's sacrifice and priestly mediation. Christ's sacrifice, unlike Akan traditional sacrifices, involved the blood of the priest, not the blood of a sacrificial victim that is different from the priest, usually an animal.

Christ, therefore, becomes (for the Akan Christian) a type of the sacrificial victim in the Akan religious setting. The Akan word for purification is *odwira* (from the verb *dwira*, purify). In traditional festivals (such as the *Odwira* festival), the traditional priest purifying the people by sprinkling water on them using an *adwera* plant (the plant for purification). Bediako (2000:33) argues, based on Hebrew 1:3b, that the *Odwira* festival shows that Christ's sacrifice is efficacious, complete, and final and supersedes all sacrifices made annually at the *Odwira* festival. Therefore, Christ is capable of saving all who do not trust in their own works but in the eternal redemption that he (Christ) secured on the cross. Referring to Christ unique priesthood and sacrifice, Bediako (2000:33) writes: "Christ himself, (the Twi here – *ɔde n'ankasa ne ho* – being more expressive than the English versions), who has become our *Odwira*." The expression *ɔde n'ankasa ne ho* (lit. he used himself) underlines Christ entered the heavenly sanctuary by means of his own blood. This makes Christ incomparable to any human priest. He entered the sanctuary by means of his own blood for the purpose of purifying those who come to him in faith. Thus, the purificatory effect of the Christ's atonement brings all traditional *odwira* sacrifices to an end because of the superior *Odwira* sacrificial victim that was sacrificed once-for-all on the cross. In other words, the annual sacrifices made for the purification of the Akan people, has been fulfilled and transcended by the once-for-all perfect *Odwira* sacrifice offered by Christ through his death on the cross. The repetitious nature of Akan traditional sacrifices and the lack of a universal sacrifice in the Akan society, disqualifies any Akan sacrifice to be regarded as *afɔdepreko* (once-for-all). Akan Christian soteriology needs to emphasise that Christ's atonement, being complete, perfect and final, demands an end to any sacrifices in any human society. That is, since Christ's sacrifice annulled and ended all other sacrifices, all the blood of all immolated animals is no more relevant.

Conclusion

In this article, the author demonstrated the superiority of Jesus' priesthood based on the kind of sanctuary in which he ministers, the means by which he enters the sanctuary, the kind of sacrifice he offers and the benefits that his sacrifice offers to humanity. Christ supersedes all these sacrificial victims in every respect, be it the value of the sacrifice, the method of the sacrifice, what the sacrifice achieves, or any other respect. In conclusion, it must be noted that the links between Akan traditional atoning practices and Christ's atonement can only facilitate a Christian understanding of God's ultimate sacrifice rather than giving a perfect analogy for the death of Christ and its benefits. Therefore, one needs to be careful not to look for point-by-point correspondence between Christ's sacrifice and those in any society because strictly speaking Christ's sacrifice is incomparable to any past, present, or future sacrifice in the history of the universe. This fact has some ramifications for Akan Christians. Firstly, Akan Christians must look up to Christ alone for both their physical and spiritual needs because he alone has the ability to mediate God's blessings to them. Secondly, Akan Christians must be encouraged to desist from idol worship because they have now realized that Christ is the only way to the one true Triune God. Thirdly, Akan Christians need to rely on Christ for their redemption because the study has shown clearly that true redemption comes as one of the benefits of Christ's substitutionary death. Finally, the church is encouraged to give adequate attention to the soteriological relevance of the atoning sacrifice of Christ in her quest to ensure qualitative growth of the believing community.

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