

## Christ's Death as the Perfect Sacrifice for Sin: An African Context

By Ebenezer Afolabi

Culled from *The Uniqueness of Christianity: Presenting Jesus to non-Christians in Africa*

Sacrifice plays a central part in the traditional religions of Africa. Traditional Africans offer sacrifices as means to either obtain divine favour, to appease the wrath of an angry deity, as a means of fellowship, to prevent or avert impending doom, or for gratitude —sacrifices are offered for different purposes. There are also other types of sacrifices that are similar to Old Testament system of sacrifice: substitutionary, propitiatory, votive, expiatory sacrifice, etc. However, the supreme form of sacrifice in most African traditional societies is the human sacrifice —though this happens occasionally. Animals are mostly used for sacrifices. Human sacrifice is done when there is epidemic, death among young people in the community or other exigent rituals to be done.

It is a widely held belief that the killing of an animal may spare individual as well as collective lives. In that context, animals are thus slaughtered in an effort to safeguard the community. It is also a consistent understanding that the life of the animal is passed onto the people to which they are closely connected, to strengthen and protect them. In this respect, both wild and domesticated animals are sacrificed. The most typical of domesticated animals used in this process are sheep, goat, cattle, dogs, and fowl. Wild animals are used in rain-making ceremonies, as well as to chase away epidemics and public danger and to purify the environment.<sup>1</sup>

However, in Hebrews 10:1-4, the writer insists that the sacrifice of Jesus is superior, not only to the Old Testament system of sacrifice, by implication, it is also superior to all other human constituted system of sacrifice. *“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins . . . we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all”* (Hebrews 10:1-4, 10b; emphasis mine).

---

<sup>1</sup> Molefi Kete Asante & Ama Mazama ed., *Encyclopedia of African Religion* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 56

The sacrifice of Jesus the Son of God is the final, perfect and only adequate sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Cornelius Olowola summarily puts it this way:

1. The Sacrifice of Christ atones for sin while African sacrifices could only remove ceremonial pollution (at least, it is believed to be) but they cannot remove guilt of sin (Heb. 9:13, 14). Christ can atone for sin because he himself was without sin.
2. Christ's sacrifice is substitutionary. One of the reasons for African sacrifice is to offer an animal (or sometimes a human being) to take the place of another individual or a community. But the sacrifices of Christ, is the perfect, complete offering for those evils which are worse than any physical disease, in the life of man.
3. Christ's sacrifice made him the mediator of the new covenant (Heb. 9:15). This renders useless all traditional sacrifices because through the mediatorial death of Christ, man has been redeemed and granted God's promised inheritance.
4. Christ sacrifice destroyed the power of the evil one (Heb. 2:14-15). Since Christ overcame the evil powers, there is no need for African Christian to sacrifice anything to appease evil spirits. They only need to appropriate Christ's death in order to experience freedom from the evil one.
5. Christ's sacrifice reconciles man to God; African sacrifices are offered sometimes to appease the anger of the spirits. But man's problem is his disobedience to God which has made him sinful. God himself, through the sacrifice of Christ has opened the way of reconciliation (Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 5:18-21).<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, through the death of Jesus, the estrangement from our Creator has been healed; we are ransomed, redeemed, redeemed, forgiven, and we can be adopted into the family of God. The sacrifice of Jesus ended the necessity for every form of sacrifice because He has offered the perfect sacrifice once and for all.

On the final note, of what good is the death of Jesus without His resurrection? The truth of His resurrection offers mankind the greatest hope. His death demonstrated His love, but His resurrection demonstrated His power—" . . . it was *impossible* for death to keep its hold on Him" (Acts 2:24b, emphasis mine).

---

<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Olowola, *African Traditional Religion and the Christian Faith* (Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1993), 47

The historical fact of the resurrection is the very foundation for the Christian faith. It is not an optional article of faith—it is faith! The resurrection of Jesus Christ and Christianity stand or fall together. One cannot be true without the other. Belief in the truth of Christianity is not merely faith in faith—ours or someone else’s—but rather faith in the risen Christ of history. Without the historical resurrection of Jesus, the Christian faith and the church itself are worthless exercises in futility if Jesus has not been literally and physically raised from the dead. Without the resurrection, we might as well forget God, church and following moral rules and “feast and drink, for tomorrow we die!” (1 Cor. 15:32).<sup>3</sup>

In their book, *Evidence for The Resurrection*, Josh and Sean suggests six reasons why people fear death and how the resurrection of Jesus gives us freedom from the fear of death. Six reasons why we fear death:<sup>4</sup>

**1. Death is mysterious and unknown.** It is normal to fear the unknown. Getting married, moving to a new city or making a new investment can all bring a certain amount of apprehension because we don’t know exactly what to expect. But death poses a greater mystery than anything else; it is the greatest of all unknowns. Once having entered that realm, no one ever returns to tell us about it. It is something we can never truly understand until we experience it ourselves.

**2. We have to face death alone.** If we could all join together and face the unknown mysteries of death in a group, perhaps it would be easier to bear the thought of it. But we cannot. We must travel alone into that dark night.

**3. We are separated from our loved ones.** We wonder if our relationships can possibly continue after this life. Will we ever meet our loved ones again?

**4. Our personal hopes and dreams will not be realized.** When we die, our goals die with us. We cannot continue to build our dreams. Death ends the best of our plans.

**5. Death raises the possibility that we will be annihilated.** We fear that death could mean the end of everything. After our death, will we continue to exist?

**6. Death is unavoidable.** Even with today’s scientific advances that extend the length of our lives, all of us will die. Even Methuselah, the Old Testament patriarch who lived almost 1,000 years,

---

<sup>3</sup> Josh McDowell & Sean McDowell, *Evidence For The Resurrection* (California, USA: Regal, 2009), 46

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 52

eventually succumbed to death. The Bible tells of a few people who were brought back from the dead, but all of them except Christ died again. No one can escape the inevitability of death.

Not only is death inevitable and fearsome, sometimes it hits suddenly in ways we could never have anticipated. Such uncertainty can be debilitating, even for believers in Jesus. In spite of their belief, they can still wrestle with the emotional pain of death. We grieve deeply the loss of our loved ones, even though we do not grieve as people without future hope. While the Bible never promises complete deliverance from the emotionally difficult aspects of death, we are told that victory over the utterly paralyzing fear of it is within our grasp. Anticipating heaven doesn't get rid of our apprehensions about the unknown aspects of death, but it can help to minimize the fear that death brings by putting it in a larger context and seeing it from a new perspective. Truly understanding the biblical doctrine of resurrection has the added benefit of freeing us from debilitating fear of our final journey into the unknown realm.<sup>5</sup>

The power of the resurrection is in a class of its own. In resurrecting Jesus from the dead, God has done what we cannot do: He has conquered the powers of death. Although we may fear the process of dying, death itself need not be feared. The resurrection of the crucified Christ provides the hope that God, not death, will ultimately control our destiny.<sup>6</sup>

Although sceptics have attempted to discredit the fact of Christ's resurrection by providing alternative theories to the resurrection of Jesus and also offering other explanations for the resurrection like the hallucination theory, swoon theory, wrong tomb theory, and the Qur'an's claim that Jesus was not killed or crucified on the cross, but another person who looked like him took his place on the cross (Sura 4:157-158), and many other illogical objections.

There are many reasons why the substitution legends are not historically credible. First, they are contrary to the extant record of eyewitness testimony that it was "Jesus of Nazareth" who was crucified (Matt. 27; Mark 14; Luke 23; John 19). Second, these substitution legends are contrary to the earliest extrabiblical Jewish, Roman, and Samaritan testimony about the death of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 52-3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 57

<sup>7</sup> Geisler & Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 287

In *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, Gary Habermas reports that virtually all scholars from across the ideological spectrum—from ultra-liberals to Bible-thumping conservatives—agree that the following points concerning Jesus and Christianity are actual historical facts:

1. Jesus died by Roman crucifixion.
2. He was buried, most likely in a private tomb.
3. Soon afterwards the disciples were discouraged, bereaved, and despondent, having lost hope.
4. Jesus' tomb was found empty very soon after his interment.
5. The disciples had experiences that they believed were actual appearances of the risen Jesus.
6. Due to these experiences, the disciples' lives were thoroughly transformed. They were even willing to die for their belief.
7. The proclamation of the Resurrection took place very early, from the beginning of church history.
8. The disciples' public testimony and preaching of the Resurrection took place in the city of Jerusalem, where Jesus had been crucified and buried shortly before.
9. The gospel message centred on the preaching of the death and resurrection of Jesus.
10. Sunday was the primary day for gathering and worshiping.
11. James, the brother of Jesus and a sceptic before this time, was converted when he believed he also saw the risen Jesus.
12. Just a few years later, Saul of Tarsus (Paul) became a Christian believer, due to an experience that he also believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus is the single most important event in human history. It is the focus of the Christian faith; it is where our hope rests. Without His resurrection, the apostle Paul said:

- (a). our preaching is useless (1 Cor. 15:14);
- (b). our faith is vain (vs.14);
- (c). the apostles are false witnesses about God (vs.15);
- (d). believers are yet in their sins (vs. 17);
- (e). the dead in Christ are perished (vs. 18).

The implications of the resurrection of Jesus are enormous. His resurrection is what fully confirms the truth and validity of what Jesus taught. It is the greatest proof of His divinity. Also

---

<sup>8</sup> Norman L. Geisler & Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist* (Illinois, USA: Cross Way Books, 2004), 300-1.

of a great benefit to believers in Christ is the fact that Christ's resurrection is the *guarantee* of their own resurrection too. Believers shall one day wear a glorified body like Jesus— a body free from pains, diseases, weakness, decay, deterioration and the agony of death.

Jesus Christ is not like other world leaders; He is not like Muhammad, Buddha, Alexander or Caesar. He is God. He is not the chairman of the board of world leaders; He is God. He is not a lesser or inferior god; He is the Almighty God. Therefore, the greatest good that any man can do to others is to introduce them to Jesus as the Lord and the Saviour of the whole world. In conclusion, in spite of the apparent religious plurality in Africa, I agree with the sentiment of F.F. Bruce that *Christianity is the religion*—the final and true religion.<sup>9</sup>

### **Bibliography and Books for Further Reading**

Afolabi, Ebenezer. *Doing Apologetics With An African Mindset*. Ogun, Nigeria: With the Word Independent Publisher, 2019.

Anderson, J.N.D *Christianity: The Witness of History*. London: Tyndale Press, 1969.

Asante, Molefi Kete & Ama Mazama ed., *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009.

Bruce, F.F. *First-century Faith*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament.* " *In Revelation and the Bible*, ed. C.F. Henry. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1958

Crossan, John Dominic. *Who Killed Jesus?* New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

Duffield, Guy P., Van Cleave, Nathaniel M.: *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*. Los Angeles, Calif.: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983.

Elwell, Walter A., Comfort, Philip Wesley: *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001.

Evans, William. *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1949

---

<sup>9</sup> Ebenezer Afolabi, *Doing Apologetics With An African Mindset* (Ogun, Nigeria: With the Word Independent Publisher, 2019), 226

- Geisler L. Norman & Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993
- Geisler, Norman L. & William E. Nix, *From God to Us*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.
- Geisler, L. Norman & Frank Turek. *I Don't Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist*. Illinois, USA: Cross Way Books, 2004.
- Geisler L. Norman & William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy* Grand Rapids: Michigan, Baker Books, 2011
- Green, Michael. *Man Alive*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968.
- Günther, Sebastian and Todd Lawson, ed., *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, vol.1. Boston: Brill, 2017.
- Hagee, John. *The Seven Secrets* (Florida: Charisma House, 2004
- Horton, David. *The Portable Seminary*. Michigan: Bethany House Publishers, 2006.
- Jones, Paul Timothy. *Conspiracies and the Cross*. Florida, USA: FrontLine, 2008.
- Little, Paul E. *Know Why You Believe*. Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1988  
 \_\_\_\_\_. *Know What You Believe*. Nigeria: Still Waters Publications, 2003.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969.
- McCain, Danny and Keener Craig, *Understanding and Applying the Scriptures*. Jos, Nigeria: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2003.
- McDowell, Josh. *A Ready Defense*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993.
- McDowell, Josh and Sean McDowell. *Jesus: Dead or Alive?* California: Regal, 2009.  
 \_\_\_\_\_. *Evidence For The Resurrection*. California, USA: Regal, 2009.
- Morey, A. Robert. *The Trinity: Evidences and Issues*. Iowa Falls, IA.: World Pub., 1996.
- Oden, C. Thomas. *How Africa Shaped The Christian Mind*. Downers Grove: Illinois, IVP Book, 2007.
- Olowola, Cornelius. *African Traditional Religion and the Christian Faith*. Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1993.
- Robert J. Little, *Here's Your Answer*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1967.

- Schoville, N. Keith. *Biblical Archaeology in Focus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1978).
- Stott, R. W. John. *Basic Christianity*. Downers Grove, III: InterVarsity Press, 1958.
- Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Christ*. USA: Zondervan, 2007.
- Strobel, Lee and Garry Poole, *Exploring The Da Vinci Code* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006).
- Philip, Johnson C. and Saneesh Cherian. *Introduction to Integrated Christian Apologetics*. India: A Calvin Research Group Academic Resource, 2003.
- . *Branches of Apologetics*. India: A Calvin Research Group Academic Resource, 2003.
- Pliny the Younger, *Letters, II*, books 8-10. Panegyricus, Loeb Classical Library, ed. B. Radice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1969.
- Prince, Dennis. *I Was Wrong* Florida: Creation House, 2013.
- Wright, N.T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 2003.

#### **Internet Resources**

- Afolabi, Ebenezer. *How the Maasai's Creed Expresses the Full Humanity and Full Divinity of Jesus*.  
<https://m.facebook.com/groups/AfricanChristianTheology/permalink/795487224397391/>  
 (accessed March 27, 2021).
- Davis, Truman. *A Physician's View of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ*. www1.cbn.com (accessed October 13, 2019).
- Goergen, Donald J. *The Quest for the Christ of Africa*.  
<https://sedosmission.org/old/eng/goergen.htm> (accessed July 24, 2018).
- Holden, Joseph M. *The James Ossuary: The Earliest Witness to Jesus and His Family?*  
<http://normangeisler.com/the-james-ossuary-the-earliest-witness-to-jesus-and-his-family/>  
 (accessed July 16, 2018).
- Palmer, Timothy P. *African Christian Theology: A New Paradigm* <https://tcnn.ng/african-christian-theology-a-new-paradigm> (accessed July 25, 2018).
- Pelikan, J. "Maasai Creed," *America Public Media*, May 18, 2006,  
<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/pelikan/masai.shtml> (accessed September 13, 2019).



Slick, Matt. *Logical Problem with the Michael Becoming Jesus Who Became Michael Again*. <https://carm.org/logical-problem-with-angel-michael-become-jesus-beome-michael> (accessed July 24, 2018).

### Articles

Afolabi, Ebenezer. *Understanding and Applying the Scriptures*. A seminar paper delivered at LIFE Theological Seminary, Ibafo study centre on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July, 2017.

Bahnsen, Greg “The Concept and Importance of Canonicity,” *Antithesis* 1, no. 5 (September/October 1990).

### Qur’an Version

Ali, Yusuf Abdullah. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*. Electronic version, 2004, S. Surah 4:116

### About the Author

Ebenezer Afolabi is a pastor, a worship leader, a conference speaker, a counsellor, an apologist and a Bible teacher. He lectures in one of the study centres of LIFE Theological Seminary, Ikorodu Nigeria.

To invite Ebenezer Afolabi to speak in your conference, symposium, seminar or convention, revival or retreat, please write to:

#### **Ebenezer Afolabi**

Foursquare Gospel Church  
206 Ebute Ojora Street,  
Ebute Road, Ibafo Ogun State  
Nigeria.

Phone: Telephone: +2348159214361, +2348160525695

Email: [ebenezerafolabi54@gmail.com](mailto:ebenezerafolabi54@gmail.com)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/ebenezer.afolabi.100](http://www.facebook.com/ebenezer.afolabi.100)

WhatsApp: +2348160525695.

Author’s Page: [www.amazon.com/author/ebenezerafolabi.100](http://www.amazon.com/author/ebenezerafolabi.100)