

Is Obedience Better than Sacrifice? An Intercultural Reading of John 12:27-36

Elizabeth Mburu, Langham Literature Regional Coordinator, Africa and Extraordinary Researcher, North-West University.

Abstract

This paper tackles the question of obedience versus sacrifice, as considered in the larger context of fullness of life in the Gospel of John. The phrasing that presents these two choices implies that one way is better than the other. This paper will show that this may be a valid dichotomy, particularly when seen through the lens of the OT. However, when refracted through Christ, the false dichotomy embedded in the question is clearly revealed. The Africentric intercultural hermeneutic applied in this paper to the text of John 12:27-36 will demonstrate that the answer rests not in an option of “either/or” but in “both/and.” This approach is based on a theoretical framework that encourages a dialogue between the African context and the biblical context and that provides useful parallels and significant differences for engaging with the text of John 12:27-36. It also addresses issues of theology, literature and history. Ultimately, the answer to this question lies in the recognition that for Jesus, sacrifice is the culmination of obedience, because in the New Covenant, he fulfils the Jewish cultus and the sacrificial system. This is what exemplifies fullness of life in his own life.

1. Introduction

The question, “Is obedience better than sacrifice?”, is intriguing, particularly when considered in light of the theme “Fullness of life in John.” Its sentiments are best remembered from the story of Saul in 1 Samuel in which God equates Saul’s act of disobedience, and his attempt to rectify it through sacrifice, with divination and idolatry. This question implies that one way is better than the other in attaining fullness of life. This would be accurate in the story of Saul and later in Israel’s history. Old Testament prophets affirm that sacrifice without genuine obedience is abhorrent to God (cf. Hs 6:6; Ml 1:8; Amos 5:21-27; Mic 6:6ff; Is 1:11-31; Jr 6:20; 7:21f.). Empty sacrificial ritual could never be a substitute for righteous conduct and obedience. The NT also emphasizes this but goes even further. Prominence is given not to the act of sacrifice, but to the heart attitude of the one sacrificing (Mt 12:7). In his confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus puts the sacrificial system in perspective. So, in these

cases, obedience is indeed better than sacrifice.

However, when considering the example of Jesus Christ, this question leads us to a false dilemma. Through an intercultural hermeneutic, this paper will demonstrate that for Christ, obedience leads to sacrifice, and there is no sacrifice without obedience. The text of John 12:27-36 visibly demonstrates the relationship between obedience and sacrifice in Jesus' life and invalidates the question. In essence, the question ought to be a phrase that reads, "Both obedience and sacrifice." For Jesus, sacrifice is the culmination of obedience, because in the New Covenant, he fulfils the Jewish cultus and the sacrificial system. This is what exemplifies fullness of life in his own life.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The methodology that will be applied is the 'Four-Legged Stool African Hermeneutic'. This approach has five steps – parallels to the African context, theological context, literary context, historical context, and application. It is possible that this model could be usefully adapted to any cultural context (particularly where the parallels are concerned). However, the hermeneutical principles applied to the various genres are developed specifically from East African oral and written literature.

With regard to its theoretical framework, it is an intercultural model that encourages a dialogue between the African context and the biblical context; it is based on the concept of moving from the known to the unknown, moving directly from theories, methods and categories that are familiar in the African world into the world of the text; it recognizes the assumptions readers bring to the text as a result of their contextual situation ; African cultures (material and non-material) are a significant tool for the interpretive process; it recognizes the value of the theological, literary and historical contexts of the text (here it has some similarities with some Western methods but these are conceptualized from an African perspective). Finally, effective hermeneutics requires a three-way dialogue between the "world behind the text", "the world of the text", and "the world in front of the text." All three stand in a context that must be interrogated and the two horizons of meaning and significance are kept distinct.

3. Overview of text

In this text (Jn 12:27-36), the narrator reports a conversation between

Jesus, God, and the crowd, that highlights Jesus' impending death. This conversation is triggered by the coming of the Greeks who had approached Philip with the request that they wanted to see Jesus (12:21). This is significant in that "the coming of the Gentiles heralds the climax of his ministry; his "hour" has at last arrived ... and it will witness his glorification." In what follows, the narrator weaves presence, obedience and sacrifice effortlessly together – like two sides of the same coin.

Leg 1: Parallels to the African context (both traditional as well as modern)

This leg primarily involves identifying parallels between the African and the biblical contexts. It is a bridge that allows us to begin to understand the biblical text from a familiar position and to interrogate our assumptions so that we can begin to correct any faulty assumptions that may hinder the interpretive process. This bridge therefore defines the scope or the boundaries within which meaning may be sought. Because of the two-sided nature of historical conditioning, this inter-dynamic process guides us in identifying both points of contact and differences with the biblical context.

Leg 1: Parallels to the African context (what is this doing here ... same as Leg 1 ..above)

We know that the arts embody and express human values and beliefs and the African way of life bears testimony to this. The literature of a people is therefore a window into their worldview. The following story of Wanjiru, taken from the Gikuyu people of Kenya, is useful for uncovering the parallels.

Long ago there was a famine in Gikuyu land. This famine caused the cows and goats to die. Only human beings were left and even then, it could be seen that they would not live much longer. Now the people asked themselves, "What shall we do?" It was decided that the most beautiful girl, one called Wanjiru, should be sacrificed to God so that the rain could fall. She was brought to a place where there was a very big river, she sang;

Rain fall and make this ridge green, Make this ridge green

My father said I should be lost. I should be lost

My mother said I should be lost. I should be lost

Rain fall and make this ridge green, Make this ridge green

She went down up to the knee, she sang:

Rain fall and make this ridge green, Make this ridge green

*My father said I should be lost. I should be lost
My mother said I should be lost. I should be lost
Rain fall and make this ridge green, Make this ridge green
The water reached the waist, she sang:
Rain fall and make this ridge green, Make this ridge green
My father said I should be lost. I should be lost
My mother said I should be lost. I should be lost
Rain fall and make this ridge green Make this ridge green
The water reached the neck, she sang:
Rain fall and make this ridge green, Make this ridge green
My father said I should be lost. I should be lost
My mother said I should be lost. I should be lost
Rain fall and make this ridge green, Make this ridge green*

The head went in. Very heavy rains fell on this land. The grass grew and a lot of food grew and the people began to feel better. Now when Wanjiru went, she found her people who had died before her. These people had a lot of cows and goats. Now they asked her what she would like. She said she wanted cows and goats. She was given many cows and goats and then she was told to lie down in a place. When she woke up she found that she had returned back to her people. She woke up at a place where there was a river and she had her cows and goats. Now when the people saw her they rejoiced greatly.

The worldview and ideological mentality of the narrator and the characters is revealed as the story unfolds. Wanjiru's willingness to sacrifice herself for the greater good of the community is evident. However, this is not without a certain measure of anguish on her part. The repetition in the song, draws us into her sadness and allows us to experience a catharsis together with her. Despite her dread, she willingly embraces death for the sake of the community. This sacrifice on her part is not without its benefits. As the story ends, we, the listeners, are satisfied with the conclusion – not only does the rain fall, ensuring that God has been appeased and the living are preserved, but Wanjiru herself is rewarded for her noble sacrifice. Here, the cleverness of the narrator reveals itself in a surprising twist. Her ancestors return her to her people in the land of the living, together with the gifts they have given her.

What parallels with the text does this story reveal with respect to the question posed in this paper? Clearly, obedience to God was required to maintain ontological balance and was driven by a worldview of dynamism, rather than love. While it may not be explicitly stated, the immanence of God could only be realized through acts of worship that included sacrifices, offerings, prayers and invocations. Consequently, sacrifice as a theological construct was a part of the worldview of the Gikuyu people. The worldview represented in the story differs from our text in that God is neither distant nor disinterested in the lives of his people. Despite this difference, sacrifice was nevertheless a crucial part of the Jewish religious system. Like the African worldview, it served to bridge the distance between God and mankind. Understanding the African worldview is useful for engaging with the text before us.

A second useful parallel is the obvious resemblance between the requirements for sacrifices in ATR and those spelt out in the law of Moses. The general principles undergirding the kind of sacrifice related to its source (from an honorable person), its colour (uniform) and its quality (perfect in every respect with no deformities whatsoever). Not only were the kinds of animals offered in both cases almost identical (*cf.* Lv 4:3, 23, 28, Lev 4:32), the perfection of the animal was paramount (*cf.* Dt 17:1; Lv 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23, 28, 32; 5:15, 18; 6:6; 9:2, 3). While the girl in the story conforms to the requirements for a sacrifice, the story has a surprising twist because human sacrifice was not common amongst the Gikuyu. However, in some cultures “it was sometimes practiced in circumstances of extreme need. ... the thinking was that it would be worth sacrificing one human life to save many from dying.” The death of one on behalf of the many is again another bridge that helps us view this text in perspective.

However, certain aspects of the worldview represented here must be confronted. We see a retribution theology being played out. In the Gikuyu culture, angering God or the ancestors by doing or saying things that would cause a rift in the family or community fellowship was bound to invoke their wrath and their swift judgment in the form of disease and other natural catastrophes. Kenyatta calls this the law of give and take. The story of Wanjiru reveals this transactional relationship clearly. Only sacrifice can restore the relationship. Sacrifice in Africa therefore had a propitiatory function. While other texts may more closely parallel this function, this is the most significant difference between the story and the

text before us.

A second difference has to do with the purpose of sacrifice. Sacrifice in Africa was never about sin as understood biblically. The Old Testament idea that we needed to offer sacrifices to acknowledge our sinful nature as opposed to God's holy nature was foreign to Africans. Sin in Africa was relational and involved a breakdown of relationships. Mbiti (date:page) explains that the purpose of sacrifice can be understood in terms of the maintenance of the ontological balance between God and man, the spirits and man, the departed and the living. 17 In the text under analysis, Jesus' sacrifice is intended as an atonement for sin. This is an essential point of difference between the African and the biblical worldview. While the differences in purpose must be kept in mind, this is nevertheless a useful point of entry into the biblical text as we recognize that Jesus' sacrifice is intended to restore the relationship between God and mankind.

A third difference relates to the anthropocentric nature of worship. Rather than extol the greatness and goodness of God, worship was utilitarian. This means that sacrifice was, in essence, self-serving. While this kind of sacrificial system may not be as prominent in modern Africa, the attitude behind it continues to dominate the lives of many believers. The conversation between Jesus and God reflects that rather than serving only the one sacrificing, there is a mutuality between the Father and Son, meaning that both receive glory through one act.

This story therefore orientate us to the text in significant ways. The parallels align us more closely with Jesus' discourse and the differences alert us to potential ways in which we might read wrong meaning into the text.

Leg 2: Theological context:

While the African approach is holistic, the spiritual dimension of life is more often than not a factor in an African's interaction with the realities around him/her. This implies that in Africa, biblical hermeneutics is inseparable from theological reflection, as the emphasis is generally to address contextual realities within our society. Because of this orientation to life, an understanding of the text's biblical-theological emphases provides the foundation for the reader, orienting his/her approach to the interpretation of the text and determining the theological boundaries within which meaning may be sought.

Sacrifice

Even though this text does not specifically mention the word “sacrifice,” the idea runs like a thread in the background. The listener is constantly aware that John is alluding to Christ’s impending sacrificial death on the cross. While the extensive theological debate surrounding the doctrine of the atonement is beyond the scope of this paper, a few remarks are necessary to establish the theological context of the text.

In the Old Testament, sacrifice and covenant are integrated. God has ordered a personal and active relationship between Himself and His people that is actualized in the sacrificial order of the Old Testament. Through the sacrificial system, God seeks to reconcile people to himself. Behm states, “Sacrifice, whether it be the gift of man to God, the expression of spiritual fellowship between God and man, or a means of atonement, is always orientated to the presence of God in grace and judgement.” (date:page) The book of Leviticus provides us with a background on the nature of sacrifice. Leviticus 16, in particular, illuminates our text. Here the concept of the sin offering and the scapegoat emphasizes the substitutionary nature of sacrifice. While the term scapegoat has been disputed, the understanding of the passage is this: “the releasing of the goat indicated that the sins of the Israelites had been removed never to visit them again.” In the Gospel of John, the substitutionary nature of Christ’s sacrifice is taken for granted in texts such as 1:29 and in the passion narrative (*ch.* 19) which makes extensive use of Isaiah 53. Viewing the text above in this light emphasizes the substitutionary and sacrificial nature of Jesus’ death.

Leg 3: Literary context:

The third leg is the literary context. It defines the boundaries of meaning. Here one identifies the genre, literary techniques, language (including lexical and syntactical issues) and the progression of the text as it unfolds, as well as in relation to surrounding texts. Because the text under analysis is narrative, certain additional rules apply from African literature.

Genre: The recognition of genre is crucial because literary genre determines the rules for reading a text thus functioning as a vital interpretive device in the hermeneutical process. The Fourth Gospel, in general, provides us with challenges in isolating its genre, not least of which are due to its similarities to Greco-Roman ‘lives’ or Bioi. However, because the ‘life’ of Jesus is set in the broader context of Israel’s history, it has an undisputed salvation-historical dimension. Because of this, the genre of this Gospel

may be understood as historical narrative with a theological-biographical character. This text falls into this category as well.

Literary techniques: African stories exist in two distinct but interconnected “worlds” - the world of the agents of communication and the world of the story. These provide us with an interpretive key.

The world of the agents of communication:

The agents of communication include the narrator and the listener. In Biblical narratives, the narrator is usually the same as the author. Following the classic approach initially proposed by Westcott, it is likely that the author was a Jew, of Palestinian origin, an eyewitness, an apostle, the beloved disciple, John, the son of Zebedee. It is also likely that he was known to his readers and served as a guarantor of the oral tradition that stemmed from Jesus’ ministry. Narrative authority can be seen in the way the story unfolds.

The listener is also usually the same as the original readers in written biblical narratives. The *sitz im leben Jesu* and the *sitz im leben der kirche* must be considered here. Scholars have disagreed as to whether the original readers were Jews or Gentiles. The narrator’s emphasis on the new temple, conflict with synagogues (16:2), and emphasis on Pharisees suggests that “their opposition is somehow related to the opponents his readers face in their own communities.”^x This suggests a primarily Jewish audience.

The world of the story:

The Story: Regarding literary flow, the larger section in which this text is found includes several signs that validate Jesus’ messiahship. Coming at the end of this section as it does, this text also demonstrates the Jews’ increasing unbelief even in the face of these signs.

Plot: The plot that drives this entire section is the conflict between belief and unbelief in the face of Jesus’ signs. While there are no signs in this discourse, the narrator puts together certain events and conversations that demonstrate that the climax of this plot is Jesus’ death. Setting: The story’s setting is the Passover (*cf.* 11:55). The literary context preceding this discourse reveals that a feast was nearing. The narrator’s presentation of Jesus as the fulfillment of the symbolism inherent in the Jewish cultus and sacrificial system provides the backdrop to this text.

Literary devices: The narrator uses several literary/narratorial and structural devices to propel the plot forward. These include dialogue with very little narration, which allows Jesus to express himself in his own words thus revealing his ideological mentality. It also slows down narrative time, alerting the listeners that this section is important. Dialogue is also a device that the narrator uses to develop Jesus' character.

Characterization: The main characters are Jesus and the crowd.

Analysis of the story:

That death is the subject is clear from Jesus' statements a few verses before. The narrator reports Jesus as saying, *Ἐλήλυθεν ἡ ὥρα ἵνα δοξασθῇ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* (The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified, cf. 12:23). This language that links *ὥρα* with *δοξασθῇ* in a purpose clause is significant. The Johannine presentation of the hour of Jesus' death is typically with reference to glorification. The metaphorical language of verse 24 further confirms that death is the subject. Jesus' death during Passover week firmly establishes Him as the fulfilment and "the prototype of the Jewish Passover." The assured and sacrificial nature of his death is therefore not in question. We have noted the parallels to sacrificial death in the story above. These verses therefore set the stage for the conversation that follows.

Beginning with the temporal marker *νῦν* (v. 27), the narrator begins to focus the readers on Jesus' current predicament as he contemplates his impending death. Although the Gospel of John does not have a Gethsemane scene, what follows closely corresponds to it. It is even likely, given the late dating of this Gospel, that the author knew and had reflected on the Synoptic account. Jesus' anguish is apparent with *τετάρρακται* expressing "revulsion, horror, anxiety, agitation." Is there a contradiction in the way that Jesus expresses his thoughts about his impending death? Is it glorification? Or is it anguish and dread? Jesus' anguish is reminiscent of the genre of lament in some psalms (e.g. Ps 6:3; 42:5, 11) and the book of Lamentations "that vents grief and pain while yet looking to God in hope." Moreover, the literary style of this Gospel frequently includes dualisms, and this is no exception. Through his words, the narrator allows Jesus to draw the listeners vividly into the tension of his experience – it is both glorification and anguish. As Ridderbos (date:page) remarks, "The duality in Jesus' approaching death ... comes strongly to the fore: Jesus' death

already belongs to his glorification, but is also the cause of his agitation.”

Throughout the Gospel, the narrator has been consistently developing Jesus’ character. The listeners are thus very much aware of his ideological mentality. Obedience to the Father has been his top priority (*cf.* 4:32). The question that follows Jesus’ expression of anguish is therefore surprising because Jesus’ very character appears to be at stake. Scholars have speculated as to whether His question (*καὶ τί εἶπω; πᾶτερ, σῶσόν με ἐκ τῆς ὥρας ταύτης.* (and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? 12:27) is genuine or rhetorical. If rhetorical, the petition is presented only to be dismissed. The deliberative subjunctive (*εἶπω*) seems to lend support to the view that it is indeed a rhetorical question. Moreover, given the consistency of Jesus’ character throughout the narrative, it is unlikely that at this point he would entertain a path that does not lead to death. Indeed, the rhetorical nature of the question does not minimise the reality of his anguish. It cannot therefore be a genuine question. In this case, its function is to introduce the following statement – Jesus’ acceptance of his divine mission. The narrator uses this literary device to reveal an important aspect of Jesus’ character. This outward display of inner turmoil reveals that for Jesus, obedience and sacrifice are inextricably intertwined.

The next statement clarifies this. Having asked the question, Jesus immediately turns the focus back on God with the statement *πᾶτερ, δόξασόν σου τὸ ὄνομα* ? need to continue (Father, glorify your name; 12:28). To glorify His Father’s name is “to make the Father’s character visibly evident,” because glory is the manifestation of the Father’s character, of who he is. The characteristically Johannine emphasis on glorification is once again brought to the fore by the threefold repetition of the verb *δοξάζω*, first as an imperative, and then in the aorist and future tenses. Although the reading *σου τὸ ὄνομα* is in all the early and most of the later witnesses, some manuscripts read *μου τὸ ὄνομα* or *σου τὸν υἱόν*, language that is probably influenced by Jesus’ high priestly prayer in 17:1. Given the development of Jesus’ character thus far, the probability for the *σου* being the most likely reading is high. At the same time, the close relationship between the Father and the Son must also be considered. When the Father is glorified, so is the Son and vice versa. For Jesus to pray this prayer, therefore, is to underscore this. One cannot discount that this is an instance of intentional ambiguity or “semantic density.”

The narrator now gives God a voice as he responds to Jesus with the words

Καὶ ἐδόξασα καὶ πάλιν δοξάσω (I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again; 12:28). The entrance of God into the conversation alerts us to the fact that this is a significant moment and that we should pay attention. The aorist in this case is typically translated with a perfect force – it is a public acknowledgement of the entirety of Jesus’ earthly activity. The future tense here likely refers to the Cross. The statement demonstrates that the Father is with him and authenticates all he does. Here again we see the twin sides of obedience and sacrifice. God honours Jesus’ impending sacrifice based on a life lived in obedience, but the obedient life was always headed toward sacrifice.

This sound is heard by all present but interpreted in different ways. This authentication may have had a different significance than expected. The crowd was expecting a nationalistic messiah who would deliver them from Roman domination and likely took this “as a sign of God’s approval of Jesus leading them against the Romans.”^{X36} Indeed, just a few days prior, they had welcomed Jesus into the city with much pomp. As is characteristic of this Gospel, the plot is impelled forward by misunderstandings. The crowd expected a physical deliverer. God gave them a spiritual one, but they did not understand it.

Beginning again with the temporal marker *νῦν*, the plot continues to move forward. Jesus’ obedience through his sacrificial death is not only anguish for him and glorification (of both him and the Father?), but also ushers in two things: The first is judgement of the world because of unbelief in Him. The second is Satan’s dethronement, the removal of the prince who rules over this world (note the genitive of subordination *τοῦ κόσμου*; 12:31). Again, the literary device of dualism, expressed in an ‘already-not yet’ eschatology comes to the fore. As Jobes (date:page) points out,

The exultation of Jesus on the cross inaugurates a new world order where God’s judgement has been fully executed and where there is no place for the reign of evil. Although the new world has been inaugurated in this age, it will be fully realized only by the promised new heavens and new earth (Is 65:17; Rv 21:1).

Reverting to metaphorical language, Jesus begins to definitively connect the entire discourse with the declaration *Κἀγὼ ἐὰν ὑψωθῶ ἐκ τῆς γῆς, πάντας ἐλκύσω πρὸς ἐμαυτόν*. (And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself; 12:32). This ‘lifted up’ terminology has a

two-fold meaning: Both Jesus' death on the cross and his ascent back to heaven. In the Jewish worldview, death by crucifixion was a shame and a curse. From a Roman perspective, it was the ultimate punishment possible and was reserved for the worst criminals. This shared worldview is in the minds of the original hearers of the text. God takes this symbol of shame and punishment, and through the obedience of his son, radically transforms it, elevating it to a symbol of glory that "dethrones Satan and inaugurates the rule of Christ."

Jesus' death has the benefit of securing salvation for all mankind. Indeed, this is confirmed by the narrator in his comment of 12:38, which is an Old Testament citation from Isaiah 53:1, the Fourth Servant Song. This song shows how God is willing to use an innocent death to accomplish peace and healing for the community. However, "all" (πάντας) in this text does not indicate a universalist salvation. Rather, it reflects that there is no limit to Jesus' saving power, except the limit of unbelief. Set in this salvific context, the lifting up of Jesus breaks all ethnic barriers. Therefore, In this statement, the Greeks have the answer they seek.

Up until this point, the narrator has not really let us in on what the crowd has to say. Now, he allows them to express themselves in their own words, thus confirming their erroneous theological mentality. While they doubtless expected that the messiah would obey God, a sacrificial death is not part of their theological construct. Their understanding of messianic prophecies from the Law led them to the conclusion that Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah if he was going to face death. After all, the Messiah was expected to remain forever (Ps 11:4; Is 9:7; Ezk 37:25; Dn 2:44; 7:14). The notion of a messiah such as the one Jesus describes (here Son of Man is nearly synonymous with Messiah, cf. 3:14) is therefore foreign to them. But, as Jobes (date:page) points out, "in fact, the messianic prophecy found in the Law is transposed to its proper sphere—the eternal reign of the messiah as Son of God, not simply as king of geopolitical Jerusalem."

We would therefore expect that at this point, Jesus would answer the crowd's question directly, thus correcting their wrong theological mentality. Instead, He reverts to the contrasting imagery of light and darkness. Light refers to Jesus (cf. 1:9) and the realm in which God reigns (some supporting verses). This is yet another affirmation that salvation comes only through Him. Darkness, on the other hand, is reflective of the world of men who live in rebellion to God. Those who choose to remain

in darkness have only one end – judgement (verses). The conflict between belief and unbelief is thus brought full circle. For the crowd, whose messianic expectations centered on an earthly kingship that would never end, this might have seemed like a “non-answer.” And indeed, having said this, the narrator tells us that Jesus hid Himself from the crowd.

This text reveals that a life of obedience to the Father, no matter how costly, characterizes Jesus’ life. This obedience leads to the acceptance of a sacrificial death on the cross. The benefits of his death encompass glorification (of both Father and Son?), authentication of the Son, dethronement of the prince of peace, and the taking away sin resulting in salvation and reconciliation for all humanity. The fulfilment motif that runs like a thread through this text means that, for Jesus, sacrifice is the culmination of obedience.

Leg 4: Historical and Cultural context

In addition to theological and literary concerns, Africans try to make sense of their lives in relation to the historical and cultural contexts in which events occur. This means that “behind the text” issues provide crucial data in the interpretive process. If authorial intent and determinacy of meaning is to be taken seriously, we must respect the alterity or “otherness” of the text.

Leg 4: Historical and Cultural context (why is this here ...same as above)

The historical and cultural contexts enhance the meaning of the text above. The Passover feast finds its genesis in the Exodus account (Exod 12:1-28). The lack of blemish of the Passover lamb represented not only the sacredness of its intended purpose. Still, it was also reflective of the moral integrity of the person represented by the sacrifice. The use of a hyssop brush to smear the blood was to be regarded as an act of expiation (v. 22) (*cf.* Lv.14:49ff; Nm 19:18, 19).^X We understand from this that the Passover lamb had a sacred and expiatory function and its death substituted for the death of the Israelite first-borns. It is in this context that Jesus is presented.

What about the mistaken notion of a nationalistic messiah who would not die but rather liberate the Jews from Roman domination? The titles ascribed to Jesus by the crowd during his triumphal entry (*cf.* Zch 9:9; Jn 6:14-15), reveal that this is a case of mistaken nationalism. Perhaps Jesus’ act of sitting on the donkey as he entered the city only confirmed the image

and expressed his willingness to become the King of Israel. Consequently, this act is understandably misinterpreted by the crowd. However, what the narrator is attempting to do with this quotation from Zechariah, is to communicate that Jesus is the Messiah who comes to redeem his people and that access to God through Jesus is unhindered.

The Seat

These four legs together reveal the probable meaning as it was intended for the original listeners. The seat is where we derive significance. The important feature of meaning as distinct from significance is that meaning (as “boundaries of meaning”) is the determinate representation of a text for an interpreter. On the other hand, significance is the application to the listener’s context expressed in terms that we understand in our own African society. This last step only confirms the tentative application of the text as uncovered in the legs above. Here one must separate the message from the cultural form in which it is communicated and distinguish between trans-contextual and culture-bound truths.

While God would never require us to die this kind of sacrificial death, the text emphasizes a general principle – obedience honours God. Our heart attitude is more important to him than anything we could offer up as a “sacrificial gift.” How do we reflect this principle in our African context? Because of our African worldview, it is easy to drift into a transactional and self-serving relationship with God. Instead, our motive for obeying God in every sphere of life, must be rooted in a genuine heart desire to glorify God.

Second, as a general principle, salvation is always based on our acceptance of Christ and his redemptive work. While sin in Africa has traditionally been understood as the relational breakdown between the physical and the spiritual realms, it is more than that. Sin, at least in this text, is the failure to believe in Christ, salvation is more than just a restoration of the ontological balance between the spiritual and the physical realms, and God does not save us through our sacrifices or our right actions. We must depend on Christ’s finished work of reconciling man and God through belief in him. A corollary application of reconciliation relates particularly to the African context. We are co-reconcilers with God and Christ.

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to show that the question “Is obedience better than

sacrifice” within the context of the theme “Fullness of life in John,” leads us to a false dilemma when considering Christ. In general, in both Old Testament and New Testament, sacrifice without genuine obedience is abhorrent to God. The intercultural hermeneutic that was used provided useful parallels and significant differences for engaging with the text of John 12:27-36. The text, set as it is within the context of the Passover feast, visibly demonstrated the relationship between obedience and sacrifice in Jesus’ life and invalidated the question. As the fulfilment of the Jewish cultus and the sacrificial system, sacrifice for Jesus is the culmination of obedience. The conclusive statement is therefore, “Both obedience and sacrifice.” This is the paradigm that ought to shape our lives.

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Email: liz.mburu@langham.org