

LIVING LIKE THE AZAZEL-GOAT IN ROMANS 12:1B¹

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Summary

Among the three epithets to 'sacrifice' in Romans 12:1b ('living', 'holy', and 'acceptable to God'), 'living' does not appear to derive from Old Testament rituals. Thus, the term is commonly thought to apply only to the New Testament believer. However, such a conclusion is syntactically and semantically awkward because the other two epithets clearly have Old Testament ritual as their background. Moreover, the Old Testament does know of a 'living' sacrifice. This study argues that these three epithets allude to a literal Old Testament (Levitical) ritual so as to portray the Christian life in a general way. Two interpretive assumptions are refuted. The first is that the spiritual dimension of the sacrifice in Romans 12:1 is absent in the sacrificial rituals of the Old Testament. The second pertains to what is meant by the phrase 'spiritual life'. Though it is commonly thought that 'spiritual life' is a New Testament concept, the Old Testament sacrificial system is also concerned with the offerer's spiritual life. It is shown that the difference between the Old Testament and New Testament concepts (cf. Rom. 12:1b) is the way in which the believer becomes the sacrifice in the latter. Thus it seems reasonable to think that the 'living sacrifice' of Romans 12:1b may have an Old Testament precedent. This study argues that its literal counterpart is the ritual for the Azazel-goat, the prescribed means for making atonement for the whole people in Leviticus 16. Reading 'living sacrifice' from this perspective suggests that Paul was encouraging believers to live like an Azazel-goat, suffering for others by the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹ The seminal idea of this article first appeared in 'A Living Sacrifice (Rom. 12:1)' *Exegetica* [Japanese] 11 (2000): 21–51.

1. 'A Living Sacrifice'?

'I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice, living, holy and acceptable to God, which is your rational service.' (Rom. 12:1, my translation)

This passage, which is commonly taken as portraying how Christians should live, clearly has an Old Testament ritual background. Believers are exhorted to present their bodies as a sacrifice, living, holy and acceptable to God. It is evident that in 'a sacrifice, living, holy, and acceptable to God', each of the three terms, 'sacrifice', 'holy' and 'acceptable to God' has a literal Old Testament ritual counterpart. Among the three epithets, the second, 'pleasing to the Lord' is the prerequisite of any sacrifice to the Lord (e.g. Lev. 1:3; 22:19, 20). The third corresponds to all the offerings made to the Lord, which are to be 'holy' (e.g. Lev. 6:17 [18]; 7:1; 22:3, 15). This short study aims to clarify what Paul intended by the first epithet 'living'. Why, and in what sense is the sacrifice said to be 'living'?

C. E. B. Cranfield points out that some English renderings of the phrase (AV, RV, RSV, NEB, Moffatt) invite the reader to conclude that Paul places special emphasis on 'living', thus creating the idea that the other two epithets ('holy' and 'acceptable to God') are added as an afterthought. By contrast, he proposes that all three epithets carry the same emphasis. Moreover, he argues that 'living' should be taken to mean something 'more akin to that of "holy" and "acceptable to God"'. He concludes that the 'living' is living in that 'newness of life'; that is, it equates to the use of 'living' in Romans 6:4.²

Though it is true that 'living' should be taken on the same syntactic level as the other two epithets, the question remains as to what is meant when the sacrifice is said to be 'living'.

As Cranfield and others suggest, there are some references to 'living' in Romans 6:2, 11, 13, in which the believer is said to be dead to sin but alive to God through Jesus Christ. Life of this kind is a life lived before God, life in Jesus Christ (e.g. 5:10, 21; 6:4), with no reference to physical death intended (6:10; even one who is killed is living before God). In these contexts Paul is speaking of the kind of life a believer should live. There is life according to flesh and life

² C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans IX-XVI* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979): 600.

according to the Spirit (8:13). Therefore it is easy to imagine that 12:1b presents what this spiritual life is like. Nevertheless, is it legitimate to interpret 'living' in terms of the 'spiritual life' when the former is conjoined with 'a sacrifice'? While it seems reasonable to conclude that 'living' refers at least partially to spiritual life, it would seem difficult to conclude that it *only* has a spiritual dimension. For if this is the case then the reader would be left in a quandary as to how to interpret the other elements of this sacrifice. Should they also only be taken figuratively? It would seem odd if 'sacrifice' has a literal meaning and 'living' a non-literal meaning. Perhaps, then, it is more accurate to assume that the phrase 'a living sacrifice' has the same level of meaning as the other two epithets. In this way, the phrase 'a sacrifice, living, holy and acceptable to God' would refer to the spiritual dimension of the believer.

In other words, the heart of the exegetical problem is that while 'sacrifice', 'holy', and 'acceptable to God' are clearly sacrificial terms in the Old Testament, it is presumed by exegetes that the other term 'living' is not, given that a sacrifice is not normally said to be 'living' in the Old Testament. If 'pleasing', 'holy', and 'living', are all figurative and to be applied to the Christian life, then would it not be strange that the sacrifice is said to be 'living', since it is presumed in Old Testament ritual that a sacrifice is to be slaughtered? If Paul intended the 'sacrifice' to be figurative, he would not have needed to add 'living' because it is self-evident that a sacrifice is presented alive when it is brought to the sanctuary; to present a dead animal is out of the question. Thus, it seems that the phrase 'a living sacrifice' still needs further clarification.

It also needs to be asked what kind of Old Testament offering Paul refers to when he mentions 'sacrifice' in this verse. It is commonly thought that it refers to the burnt offering, or offerings other than the expiatory sacrifices such as the sin offering or the reparation offering.³ However, it should not be forgotten that even the rituals for offerings such as the burnt and peace offerings prescribe how the animals are slaughtered and how their blood is handled, which indicates they are also expiatory.

³ Cf. M. J. Selman, 'Sacrifice for Christians Today', in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. R. T. Beckwith and M. J. Selman (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995): 157-69, esp. 166.

Therefore, it is inappropriate to suggest that Romans 12:1b refers directly to a specific offering. In fact, other occurrences of *thusia* in the Pauline epistles indicate that it refers very generally to various kinds of animal sacrifices (1 Cor. 10:18; Eph. 5:2; Phil. 2:17; 4:18). Thus, the whole phrase ‘a sacrifice, living, holy and acceptable to God’ should be taken as a description of what characterises the Old Testament offerings in general. Indeed, the last two epithets are a prerequisite for any offering made to the Lord.

Nevertheless, it is indeed true that the burnt offering exhibits the most basic traits of the sacrificial offering. While a distinction inevitably exists between the offerer and their sacrificial animal, the relationship between them ought to be that of identification or substitution by the laying on of a hand on the animal’s head, so that the complete burning of the animal symbolises the destruction of all the offerer’s earthly desires. However, because the burnt offering was slaughtered, it would seem difficult to understand how it could be the antecedent of ‘sacrifice, living’ in Romans 12:1, since this use of ‘living’ has a literal sacrificial practice in perspective. We will return to this question after considering in what sense ‘living’ can be taken as figurative.

2. Spirituality in the Sacrificial Ritual

Next, we consider in what sense the three terms are figurative in meaning. Some commentators assume that literal Old Testament sacrifice was spiritualised at this point. Thus, J. Dunn comments;

The ‘living’ is probably chosen to contrast the thought of a sacrifice which consists in the quality of daily living, ‘a constant dedication’ (Murray), with a sacrifice which consists in killing an animal.⁴

Setting aside the question of ‘living’, it is clear that when Paul refers to a spiritual sacrifice, he intends the reader to interpret it against the background of a literal Old Testament sacrifice. Yet, as is demonstrated below, the assumption that the literal Old Testament sacrifice becomes spiritualised in the New Testament is mistaken. For already in the Old Testament, the literal offering of a sacrifice symbolised the offerer’s purpose (dedication, thanksgiving, penitence etc.).⁵

⁴ J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–15* (WBC 38B; Texas: Word, 1988): 710.

⁵ Cf. N. Kiuchi, ‘Spirituality in Offering a Peace Offering’ *TynBul* 50 (1999): 23–31.

In Old Testament rituals the offerer of an animal sacrifice laid his or her hand upon the head of the animal, thus identifying (or substituting) themselves with the animal.⁶ Though the laying on of a hand symbolised identification, it was not a literal identification since the offerer did not die. In Romans 12:1, however, the offerer is to become a sacrifice. Thus the difference between the two sacrifices is found in the relationship between the offerer and sacrifice.

Furthermore, it is also problematic to assume that Old Testament rituals were not spiritual. A key passage of Old Testament sacrificial ritual is Leviticus 17:11, which reads as follows;

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement (*kipper*) for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. (ESV)

Relevant to our discussion is the question of whether ‘life’ in this instance is spiritual or not, which in turn requires a definition of what the term ‘spiritual’ means. Though an exhaustive discussion of the English term is not possible here, I agree by and large with the definition of C. Brown:

The sense of belonging to the realm of spirit/Spirit, or the essence or nature of spirit/Spirit, embodying or manifesting spirit/Spirit.⁷

In other words, ‘spiritual’ refers to persons and objects which are brought into relationship with God, a circumstance which need not be physical. To be more specific, the assumption that only the symbolic meaning of a physical animal sacrifice is spiritual is incorrect; *both* the animal and its symbolic meaning are regarded as spiritual since the former becomes related to the Lord when a person resolves to offer it to him. In Leviticus, anything that enters the sphere of the Lord is designated ‘holy’, and what is holy is spiritual.

Now with this broad definition in mind, we turn to the above question of life within the sacrificial ritual. It seems that the key to the solution is found in the verb *kipper*. This important term concludes various sacrificial rituals and sums up their meaning. The ritual for

⁶ For the symbolic meaning of the gesture cf. A. M. Rodriguez, *Substitution in the Hebrew Cultus* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University, 1979): 193-232; N. Kiuchi, *Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature* (JSOTS56; Sheffield Academic, 1987): 112-19; J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991): 150-53.

⁷ C. Brown, ‘Spirit’, in *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. C. Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971): 706.

cleansing of a so-called leper (Lev. 14) provides an ideal example. It should be noted that this ritual was not for the 'healing' of this person but for their purification after healing (Lev. 14:3). Thus the life of the leper, which is at issue in the ritual, must be spiritual, since it is based on the physical well-being of the healed leper. This means that a person can live before God through *kipper*-acts, though until this rite is performed he may be dead before God even though he remains physically alive.

It seems that in Romans, Paul presupposes that life before God is at stake for one's salvation. In Romans 6:10-11 Paul says:

For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (ESV)

In referring to the cross of Christ Paul does not define life as physical existence before death, but as ongoing existence in God's presence. Essentially, the life he refers to is eternal life, which a believer possesses both before and after physical death.

And in Romans 6:13:

No longer present (*paristanete*) your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present (*paristanete*) yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. (NRSV)

Clearly on this occasion Paul has in mind life under the rule of God, not simply physical existence before God. It is noteworthy that the phrase 'Present yourselves to God' appears to adumbrate 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice' in 12:1.

Furthermore, with regard to the relationship between flesh (*sôma*) and living (*zên*), Romans 8:13 suggests something about the nature of *sôma* which also appears in 12:1.

For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (ESV)

Here *sôma* is seen as having the propensity to sin. It seems that the combination of ideas given in Romans 6:13 and 8:13 approximates the idea of 12:1, in which the whole idea is expressed through the use of sacrificial imagery. Nevertheless, Paul's thinking has progressed somewhat further by this stage. Up until Romans 12:1, he has concerned himself with how a person can live before God. He encourages his readers to destroy the flesh, and present their bodies as instruments of

God's righteousness: 'From death to life' is the dominant motif. Yet in 12:1 believers are encouraged to present their bodies as living sacrifices. Here the body appears no longer to have its propensity to sin. Moreover, only a positive mood, with no reminiscence of death, is taken up with regard to the body. Indeed the term 'sacrifice' connotes death, but now it is a substitutionary death for others (see below), and not that which results from killing the flesh.

The above arguments are relevant to our discussion concerning Romans 12:1 in at least two respects. First, sacrificial rituals deal with spiritual life, so that it is erroneous to assume that the literal sacrifices prescribed in Old Testament law were spiritualised only in Romans 12:1. Second, this is confirmed by Romans 12:1a, which explicitly states 'Present your bodies'. The spiritual is distinct from the physical, but the former does not exclude the latter, rather it presumes it as is the case in this verse.

Therefore, when it comes to spirituality, there is no difference in principle between Old Testament sacrificial ritual and the Christian sacrifice in Romans 12:1, though the spiritual dimension is highlighted more by the latter in the wake of Christ's perfect sacrifice. The difference between Levitical sacrificial rituals and the idea of sacrifice in Romans 12:1 is that in the latter the sacrificial animal is replaced by the believer.

3. A Possible Antecedent to 'A Living Sacrifice'

Now it is possible to return to our initial question: Why is the term 'living' used to describe 'sacrifice'? Is it that the sacrifice is said to be 'living' because Paul is writing to Christians who remain alive physically? This is certainly possible in itself. However, this reasoning does not seem to be in Paul's mind. For as seen in the relevant passages that lead to Romans 12:1, Paul presupposes that believers in Christ are dead to their sins and alive to God. Thus, by saying 'a living sacrifice' what Paul presumes is the status of the believer before God; the believer's physical life is presupposed. Or, is it possible to construe the phrase in such a way that a literal sacrifice is coupled with 'living' in the sense of 'living before God'?

Attention should be drawn to the fact that the text describes not the believer as 'living', but the 'sacrifice' as 'living'. It is difficult to

conceive how a physical ‘sacrifice’ could be coupled with spiritual living, since both constitute one phrase. It is here that the above reassessment of the nature of the sacrificial ritual in Leviticus is significant. Already in the Levitical legislation, a sacrifice was spiritual; the spiritual presupposing the physical side of the sacrifice. Thus it is incorrect to view the spiritual aspect of Paul’s words as being exhausted by his reference to ‘living’ (in a sense excluding the physical), and his reference to a ‘sacrifice’ being purely to an actual animal.

This train of thought raises the question as to whether there was in fact an Old Testament sacrifice that could be described as ‘a living sacrifice’. Exegetes have taken it for granted that there is no such sacrifice, the result of which is the above interpretive ambiguity. Here I propose that a possible counterpart for this phrase is the *Azazel*-goat of Leviticus 16:10, 22.⁸ Leviticus 16:10 reads as follows,

... while the goat designated by lot for *Azazel* shall be left standing alive before the LORD, to make expiation with it and to send it off to the wilderness for *Azazel*. (JPS)

While the meaning of the phrase *lekapper 'alayw* continues to elude exegetes,⁹ it is noteworthy that the goat is to be ‘presented alive’. Verse 10 refers to the ritual stage in which the goat has something to do with atonement. As the ensuing ritual indicates, this ‘alive’ refers to the ritual stage and what occurs afterwards (JPS translates ‘shall be left standing alive’). Considering that a sacrifice is normally slaughtered, this translation best conveys the nuance of *yo'omad khay*.

The *Azazel*-goat is a sacrifice (Lev. 16:5) – a sin offering – but unlike all other sacrifices it is not killed. In other words, the fate of the goat starts with its being a sin offering, but takes the form of a non-sacrifice at the end. Despite the late Jewish ruling that the goat is to be killed by being pushed off from a steep cliff (Yoma 6, 6), the emphasis in Leviticus 16 lies in that, alive and before the people’s eyes, it carries

⁸ For the interpretation of *Azazel* cf. J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1020–21; B. Janowski, ‘*Azazel*’, in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, B. Becking, P. W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1999): 128–31.

⁹ Based on the fact that *kipper* is synonymous with *nasa' 'awon* (‘to bear guilt’), it is possible to argue that the *Azazel*-goat makes atonement for Aaron, and that the guilt that Aaron bears is to be devolved upon the *Azazel*-goat. See Kiuchi, *Purification Offering*: 149–52. This view was dismissed by J. Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16*: 1023), but recently supported by J. A. Sklar (*Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice and Atonement*, Ph.D. thesis [Cheltenham, 2001]: 97).

all Israel's guilt from the God's presence out into the desert. In this regard it plays an indispensable role in completing all the expiatory rituals that precede it; without it the other atonement rituals are left incomplete (see below).

It might be thought that the *Azazel*-goat ritual is too specific to be the antecedent of the 'sacrifice' referred to in Romans 12:1b. But in Leviticus the *Azazel*-goat in chapter 16 has a mysterious relationship with the burnt offering in chapter 1 (see v. 4): both make atonement; the burnt offering for the offerer and the *Azazel*-goat for the Israelites. It is to be stressed that these are the only cases, except for blood (Lev. 17:11) and ransom money (Exod. 30:15-16), in which impersonal things are said to make atonement; in the rest of the occurrences of *kipper*, the agent is the priest.¹⁰

Furthermore, most significantly, it can be observed that while in the burnt offering the offerer dedicates himself completely but not for other people, the *Azazel*-goat is sent away into the wilderness, bearing the guilt of *others*. It is unclear how far this thought was in Paul's mind when he wrote Romans 12:1. But in view of the relationship between the two sacrifices in Leviticus, he may well be saying that the believer is encouraged to dedicate himself not just for himself, but for others too.

Given the parallel to the *Azazel*-goat, it should be noted that Mishnah calls the goat 'sent-away goat' (*sa'ir hammishtaleakh*, Yoma 4:2; 6:2, cf. LXX Lev.16:10). And this appellation may have been normative in the contemporary Jewish culture in which Paul lived. At any rate, it was never called 'a live goat'; in fact, the goat was killed as stated above. In view of such circumstances, Paul, by alluding to this goat as 'a living sacrifice', may be drawing the reader's attention to the Old Testament version of the *Azazel* rite rather than to the later Jewish version.

The author of Hebrews 13:10-13 also encourages believers to live like Christ. Evidently he draws here a parallel between the sin offering that cannot be eaten by the priest and thus should be burnt outside the camp (Lev. 4:11-12, 21; 6:30 [MT 6:23]), and the suffering of Christ outside the city. However, it should be stressed that already in Leviticus the sin-offering ritual is not simple: the ritual in Leviticus 4 is

¹⁰ See Kiuchi, *Purification Offering*: 152.

temporary and imperfect,¹¹ while the fuller version is performed on the day of Atonement, whose prescription is found in Leviticus 16. In other words, the ritual elements in chapter 4 can be taken as adumbrating the ritual in chapter 16. Furthermore, in the ritual of the day of Atonement in chapter 16, it should be noted that in verses 26, 28 the same rule on defilement and purification is applied to the person who handles the *Azazel*-goat and to the one who handles the remaining flesh of the sin offering. This fact implies that the *Azazel*-goat ritual is a special form of the burning of the sin offering outside the camp.¹²

The interpretation that the *Azazel*-goat ritual constitutes the culminating point of the sin-offering ritual, simultaneously symbolising something beyond the sin offering, seems to be more in line with the other OT prophetic passages such as Psalm 40:6-8, in which no sin offering is said to be necessary (cf. Heb. 10:5-9, 18). Therefore, it is also possible to see the *Azazel*-goat ritual behind Hebrews 13:12-13. Seen this way, the lifestyle of Christ was compared with that of the *Azazel*-goat. Since Christ fulfilled the role of the *Azazel*-goat in a cosmic dimension, believers have no need to bear guilt, whether their own or that of others, in order to make atonement. So if believers are encouraged here to live like an *Azazel*-goat, it is meant in a general sense (Heb. 13:15-16).

All in all, it does not seem to be far-fetched to suggest that the *Azazel*-goat is the antecedent to the 'living sacrifice' in Romans 12:1b.

As argued above, the life of a sacrificial animal is spiritual in that it is brought to God. This means that though the *Azazel*-goat was not killed, the goat symbolised – or pointed to – spiritual life. Thus, when the *Azazel*-goat ritual is fulfilled in the work of Christ, Christ is said to be 'alive to God' (Rom. 6:10) even after his physical death. In other words, the spiritual life symbolised by the *Azazel*-goat became, through Christ, the life of the believer in New Testament times. On such an

¹¹ For instance, the imperfect character of the ritual in contrast with the Day of Atonement ritual can be observed in that the anointed priest does not enter the holy of holies on this occasion, whereas his ritual acts point to the cleansing of the holy of holies. The latter can be inferred from the prescription that he is to sprinkle the blood seven times toward the veil into which the pattern of cherubim is woven. See Kiuchi, *Purification Offering*: 129, which is followed by R. Rendtorff, *Leviticus 2,1–5,26* (BKAT III/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990): 159–60.

¹² For further argument for the view that the *Azazel*-goat rite is a special form of the burning of the flesh outside the camp, see Kiuchi, *Purification Offering*: 144–56.

understanding it is unnecessary to consider that in Romans 12:1b the physical *thusia* is conjoined with the spiritual *zôsa*. It could be envisaged that a live animal sacrifice in the Old Testament became a human living sacrifice in New Testament times.

It can be concluded that Paul, by alluding to the *Azazel*-goat ritual, exhorts believers to present their bodies as a sacrifice; in other words, to live a self-sacrificial life.