

Christians of a Hebrew Background Offering Animal Sacrifices

A clear section of scripture showing this as a common practice in Jerusalem is the passage in Acts 21. When Paul disobediently went to Jerusalem, he was told “how many thousands of Jews there are which believe and they are all zealous of the law.” James and the other elders then encouraged him to take certain actions* that would indicate to the Christians at Jerusalem that Paul was keeping the Law (Acts 21:24). They then encouraged that an offering should be made for Paul, which would be an animal sacrifice.

Acts 21:26:

Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them.

The offering mentioned in Acts would refer to sacrificing a “male lamb of the first year without blemish for a burnt offering, and one ewe lamb of the first year without blemish for a sin offering, and one ram without blemish for peace offerings...” (Numbers 6:14) This clearly shows that continuing to practice the law included offering animal sacrifices.

There is much throughout the book of Hebrews cautioning the believers from reverting to Old Covenant practices. In many ways, that is what the whole Book is about - the New Covenant in Christ’s blood is superior to the Old Covenant in animal sacrifices.

Let’s remember that, at the time Hebrews was written, the temple in Jerusalem was still standing and functioning as the center of Judaism. That means that twice every day, animal sacrifices were being offered as well as all the other gifts and sacrifices prescribed by the law of Moses. As has been mentioned multiple times in the class, the function of the priests, them offering sacrifices in the tabernacle (Temple) are the predominant themes of the law. Put that together with the address of Hebrews – to the “many thousands (tens of thousands!) of Jews there are that believe; and they are all zealous of the law.” What does it mean to be “zealous of the law?” They were practicing the law zealously! This certainly would have included the sacrifices the priests offered daily at the temple. I shared this in light of Hebrews 6:6. This “falling away” is deserting the foundation of Christ’s accomplishments, the elementary principles of Christianity. Putting their trust in old testament sacrifices instead of the once and for all sacrifice of Christ crucifies “the son of God afresh” and puts “him to an open shame.” Note the use “open shame” meaning public ridicule. This was being done in public openly. What was more of a public display than it being done every day at the most prominent location of all – the Temple!

This isn’t to say all those addressed in the Epistle of Hebrews had fully and completely reverted to practicing the law. So much of the heart of the Book is encouragement to persist, and continue to believe in light of the hope and not give in to the pressure coming from those legalists trying to undermine their believing.

As I mentioned at the beginning of our study, Hebrews assumes knowledge of the Old Testament. That can make it difficult for the Christian today who would not see the references to sacrifice, priest and tabernacle as a part of the every day life and practice of the Jews for over 1600 years. Needless to say, it was difficult for them to change.

***namely to join others that had vowed a Nazirite vow (see Numbers 6:1-20)**