

A CALL TO PRIESTLY WORSHIP

by Michael Rudolph

Worship Unto Salvation

Throughout the centuries, God has consistently designated sacrifice as the supreme form of worship through which we receive atonement and ultimately salvation (Hebrews 9:22). We see a foreshadowing of this in Isaac's near encounter with the altar of sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-30), and from Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt through application of the blood of a sacrificed lamb (Exodus 12:1-30).

Eventually, God directed the building of a Tabernacle (Exodus 25:8-9) where worship in the form of sacrifice was to occur, and He established a priesthood under a high priest (Exodus 40:12-16) to continuously conduct sacrifices for various purposes (see Malachi), the chief one being to atone for the sins of individuals and of the entire nation (Leviticus 1:1-4, 16:15-22; Numbers 15:22-29). God demonstrated the seriousness of sacrificial worship by prescribing minute details for its implementation (Leviticus 1:1-17), departure from which resulted in grave consequences (Leviticus 10:1-3, 16:2). Upon the Tabernacle's completion, the Glory of God entered (Exodus 40:34-35), and it became the only approved place for sacrificial worship.

Despite the prohibition of law, sacrifices, which had previously been conducted upon local altars, did not completely cease when the Tabernacle commenced its operations. Not only were such sacrifices unauthorized, they became increasingly offensive to God, as idolatrous heathen elements were introduced (Leviticus 26:30). Instances of worship in the "high places" became more frequent, and were still occurring when Solomon finished construction of the First Temple (1 Kings 11:7-8).

The Beginning of Institutional Prayer

Prayer was always basic to the life of Israel. We first encounter prayer in Genesis 4:26: "Then men began to call on the name of the Lord." The patriarchs, Moses, David, and others, provide glorious examples of men in fellowship with God through prayer, spoken worship, and even dialogue. Prayer was not confined to the elite, but was practiced by everyone of Israel; this is illustrated in Solomon's dedication of the Temple, when he asks God:

1 Kings 8:30: "*And may You hear the supplication of your servant and of Your people Israel. When they pray toward this place, then hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive.*"

Although Isaiah refers to the Temple as a "House of Prayer" (Isaiah 56:6-8), there is little indication that institutional prayer or study (unconnected with sacrifice) was conducted prior to, or during, the period of the First Temple;^{i,ii,iii} although such prayer would certainly have been beneficial, it nevertheless was not commanded by God, whereas Temple sacrifice was.

By c. 637 B.C.E., Temple worship and the spiritual life of God's people had fallen to a record low, and open idolatry was being practiced throughout the land. However, after the Book of

Law was discovered and read, King Josiah destroyed the altars on the high places, and he temporarily brought an end to idolatrous practices in all of Israel and Judea (2 Kings 22:1 - 23:25). In 586 B.C.E., once again in the grip of widespread idolatry, Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians, the temple was destroyed, and most of the population was carried off into captivity (2 Kings 25:1-21).

The prophets had warned the people of this impending disaster, but their warnings were not heeded (Jeremiah 34:1-7). Now, in captivity, the people repented and their hearts returned to the one true God.^{iv,v} Unable to atone for their sins through Temple sacrifice, the people, nevertheless, did not establish local shrines in Babylonia. Instead, they devised groups for informal prayer, always looking toward the time of their return, when the Temple could be rebuilt, and sacrifice to God could be resumed (Ezra; Nehemiah).

Upon their release from the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites set their goals to never again worship other gods. They continued meeting for group prayer and study, and this practice grew in popularity and slowly became institutionalized.^{vi,vii} By the time the Temple was rebuilt, and sacrificial worship was restored under the Levitical priesthood, the prototype of the early synagogue (*bet kneset*) was so ingrained in the society, that the movement toward synagogal worship was destined to become strengthened, and to co-exist with the Temple system.^{viii}

The Synagogue a Competitor

By the time of Yeshua's ministry, an ironic turn of events was having a profound and progressive impact on Jewish attitudes toward Temple sacrificial worship. The pharisees who, with initial pure intent, encouraged Israel toward universal priestly conduct modeled after the prescribed rituals of the Temple,^{ix} now found themselves in leading positions in the nation's synagogues. Synagogues sprang up everywhere, both in and out of Jerusalem, and the pharisees assumed spiritual leadership and authority over much of the population of Israel. Being advocates of priestly behavior but not having priestly anointing, it wasn't long before the pharisees fell into excessive legalism, pride of position, and Scriptural error (Matthew 23:1-39; Mark 7:1-13). While the Temple priests continued to perform their relatively unglamorous daily routine of animal sacrifice, the Pharisees conducted teachings and verbal worship (prayer and reading Scripture) at the same times as the main Temple sacrifices.^x

Although, in principle, the synagogue was not in competition with the Temple, the draw of the populace toward synagogal worship, fueled by the soulishness and arrogance of the Pharisees, was great. Of course, no one could challenge the Temple's supremacy since its establishment by God was recorded in Scripture. Nevertheless, by the time of the Second Temple's demise in 70 A.D., a clear seed of ambivalence toward the need for sacrifice had been sown.^{xi}

A Two-edged Sword

While the Rabbinic Jewish establishment credits synagogal worship with ingeniously providing a substitute mechanism by which Judaism could survive the permanent loss of the Second Temple,^{xii} it is clear that this same rationale blunted the crisis that otherwise might have driven large numbers of Jewish people to accept the atoning sacrifice offered by Yeshua. The following excerpts from scholarly Jewish sources clearly illustrate the interpretive violence done to God's system of sacrifice set forth in Scripture:

Jewish scholar and historian Abraham Millgram writes:

"One of the decisive acts of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and his Sanhedrin was to pronounce the principle that the utterance of prayer, the study of Torah, and the performance of good deeds were as acceptable to God as the sacrifices of the Temple."^{xiii}

Referring to the synagogue's salvific place in diaspora Judaism, Dr. Joseph H. Hertz, the late Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, writes:

"In Judaism itself, the synagogue proved of incalculable importance. Through it, the Sabbath and the Festivals penetrated more deeply into the Jewish soul, and the Torah became the common property of the entire people. Because of it, the cessation of the sacrificial cult, which cessation would in any other ancient religion have meant the end of that religion, was not in Judaism an overwhelming disaster. The reason is clear. Long before the fall of the Second Temple the synagogue had become the real pivot of Jewish religious life, especially so among the Jews outside of Palestine."^{xiv}

Are we therefore to conclude that, because the synagogue captured the affections of the Jewish people and provided an avenue for Judaism to survive the Temple's destruction, there must therefore be something inherently wrong with it? Are we likewise to conclude that, because there is no clear evidence that God initiated the synagogue as he did the Temple, that the only acceptable form of institutional worship is sacrifice? No, we must not conclude either. It is significant that there is not one criticism of synagogal worship recorded in all of the New Covenant Scriptures. What must be appreciated, however, is that those who promoted the synagogue above the Temple were moving away from God's plan for atonement, and were leading Israel into error. Similarly, anyone who advocates that prayer and study can replace sacrifice, is leading away from God's Messiah. Since the proponents of these heretical views also rejected Yeshua, we must be cautious of any contribution they may have made to the liturgy of the synagogue; we must scrutinize that liturgy for Scriptural error and New Covenant applicability before using it.

The Synagogue Works Well for Non-priests

Priestly worship and synagogal worship are fundamentally different in both origin and purpose. Priestly worship concerns itself with sacrifice and intercession, while synagogal worship promotes prayer, study, and fellowship. The Temple priests were expected to work in the presence of the *Shechinah* of God; the rabbis of the synagogues were not.

Since Scripture is silent on the matter, we have no way to be sure to what extent God endorsed the early synagogue. On the one hand, we know that Yeshua, and his disciples after him, attended synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16, Acts 17:1-3, 18:1-4). On the other hand, each such recorded instance shows them to be ministering rather than receiving. It is also noteworthy that the Temple priests paused during the day in order to attend synagogue, and it is widely believed among scholars, that a synagogue was operating somewhere within the confines of the Second Temple.^{xv} One thing which was surely true of the synagogue in those days is that it served a complementary function entirely unlike that of the Temple, and its participants depended upon the Temple sacrifices for their atonement and standing before God.

After the Second Temple was destroyed, the Rabbinic leaders salvaged what they could by adding priestly elements to the synagogue service.^{xvi} The synagogue was, after all, their familiar domain since most of the Rabbis were not *Kohanim*. So we find reminders of the Temple skillfully and smoothly woven into the synagogue's service, a service created and led mostly by non-priests, and devoted mainly to prayer and the reading of Scripture.

A New Priesthood in Messiah

From its very foundation in history, Israel was intended to be a nation of priests -- holy and set apart as a witness to the world that there was only one true God (Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 49:6, 60:3, 61:6; Romans 15:7-13). In Temple times, the power for an Israelite to perform as a priestly witness came from the *Shechinah* which resided in the Temple, and the atoning sacrifices through which he could be forgiven for sin. The sons of Aaron served as priests to the Israelites, and the Israelites were, in turn, to be priests to the rest of the world (Genesis 18:18, 22:18; Isaiah 2:1-5; Zechariah 8:20-23).

Now, in Yeshua, all who have received him have been made priests under his High Priesthood:

Revelation 1:5-6: *"To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and made us kings and priests to His God and Father ---"*

Hebrews 4:14: *"Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Yeshua the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession."*

The Temple priest performed various ministry functions, but the daily sacrifices were at the heart of them all; this was so, because without the shedding of blood there was no redemption from sin either for the priest, the Israelite worshiper or the nation (Leviticus 17:11, Hebrews 9:22). It is no different for those of us, both Jews and non-Jews, who are priests in Yeshua's service today:

1 Peter 2:5: *" --- you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Yeshua the Messiah."*

1 Pe 2:9-10: *"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy."^{xvii}*

The primacy of sacrifice has not changed. In his giving us a New Covenant, God removed the need to continuously sacrifice animals, and he gave us instead, a great one-time sacrifice -- the blood of his son and our Messiah Yeshua (Hebrews 9:11-15). The *Shechinah*, the Spirit of God once operative in the Temple, is now poured out upon us, empowering us to walk in our priestly calling (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5, 2:16-21). In a sense, each priest also becomes a Temple, and the power can now go wherever the priest can go (1Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19).

Just as the Temple sacrifices were not effective without the *Shechinah*, and the *Shechinah* did not minister power without the sacrifices, so it is for us today; Yeshua's priests must be

immersed in the Holy Spirit and also be continually in the presence of Yeshua the sacrificed lamb. In considering what was to come, Yeshua was concerned that, in his absence, his priests would eventually become distant from the source of their power. He therefore instructed his disciples to take bread and wine as a frequent remembrance of his sacrifice – that they would continually renew their power through identification with his shed blood (Luke 22:14-20). In more than a symbolic sense, when a New Covenant priest ministers the elements of Yeshua's sacrifice to another, the recipient is renewed in his spirit, and is newly enabled to walk in his priestly office.

The Temple Our Priestly Heritage

As priests, our spiritual roots are in the Temple of God. Our *Shechinah* is the Holy Spirit – our sacrifice is Yeshua. As the Levitical priests were ritually cleansed with water, so we must be purified through a life of holiness in Yeshua (2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Peter 1:16). The Levitical priests ministered according to detailed statutes of law. We minister with the law written on our hearts (Hebrews 8:10).

Since our calling is to be priests, our worship must be priestly worship. If we engage in anything less, the anointing on us will surely lift, and our ministry will become ineffective. Despite its majestic beauty and place of honor in Jewish history, the synagogue is not, and never was intended to be a house for priestly worship. We, who have tried to make it so and have modeled our New Covenant congregations solely after the synagogue have met with innumerable frustrations as our priestly instincts have not allowed us to adopt synagogal liturgy without significant adaptations, changes and additions. The result has often been displeasing both to those of us that love the synagogue, and those of us that consider its liturgy a hindrance to priestly worship.

Why do we Messianic Jews want to characterize our houses of worship as synagogues? There are probably two reasons: (1) We want to emphasize that Jews who follow Yeshua remain Jews, and our understanding of what is Jewish takes us to our childhood in the synagogue; (2) We want to identify with and be received as part of, the wider Jewish world. But there is a need for caution in pursuing this direction. First of all, we ought not to be defensive about our identity as Jews. God takes care of our identity. Second and more important, our memory of what is foundationally Jewish is far too short. While none of us remembers the sacrifices and the priesthood of the Second Temple, Yeshua and his disciples most certainly did. They lived in that era. They worshiped in the Temple (Acts 3:1), and until Yeshua's death and resurrection, the animal sacrifices were central to their spiritual lives. The Temple – not the synagogue – fills page upon page of our Bibles from Genesis to Revelation. The Temple – not the synagogue – was the model from which God drew in giving us our Messiah to be a replacement sacrifice (Hebrews 10:1-14).

Conclusion

If Messianic Judaism is to be of value as a witness, it must witness to what others do not already know. Orthodox Judaism and its derivative branches do not embrace New Covenant priestly functions, nor do they acknowledge the need for atoning sacrifice. It is in regard to these two matters that Messianic Judaism is unique among the other Jewish expressions, and has much to offer.

Let us not believe that we must expunge all rabbinical and synagogal elements from our worship, but let us also not hesitate to let them go whenever they hinder forward progress in our calling as priests in Yeshua. Let us openly proclaim that ours is a priestly Judaism that is ordained by God, is Messiah-centered, is Holy Spirit dependant, and is therefore fundamentally different from rabbinical Judaism. Let us boldly embrace our priestly identities as Messianic Jews, and be open to God as He moves us toward the goal of restoring all of Israel to faith and priesthood in Messiah Yeshua.

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ⁱ W. White, Jr., "Synagogue", Vol. 5, pp. 555-556, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, M. C. Tenney, Gen. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976).

ⁱⁱ Abraham Millgram, Jewish Worship, p. 64, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971).

ⁱⁱⁱ The traditional view is that Moses founded the synagogue. "Synagogue", Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 15, p. 579, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971). See also, Josephus, "Apion II".

^{iv} Heinrich Graetz, History of the Jews, Vol. 1, pp. 336-339, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1891).

^v Millgram, pp. 65-66.

^{vi} Hayim H. Donin, To Pray As A Jew, Chapt. 1, p. 12, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980).

^{vii} Millgram, p. 67.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 76-79.

^{ix} Jacob Neusner, Invitation to the Talmud, pp. 23-26, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

^x Millgram, pp. 76-77.

^{xi} Ibid., pp. 76-77.

^{xii} The early synagogue, known as the "*bet kneset*", functioned mainly for prayer. After the loss of the Second Temple, the synagogue, renamed "*bet hamidrash*", took upon itself increased community authority, and included the study of *Talmud* and *Torah*.

^{xiii} Millgram, p.81.

^{xiv} Joseph H. Hertz, The Authorized Daily Prayer Book, p. xvii, (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1975).

^{xv} Millgram, p. 77.

^{xvi} Ibid, p. 55.

^{xvii} Refers to both Israel and the Gentile nations. See also, Hosea 2:23 and Romans 9:24-27.