



Smell

“May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.”

Psalm 141:2

Connecting the sense of smell with our spiritual life can be quite difficult, we do not exactly have a verse that says – “I could smell the presence of God...” However, smell was a significant part of the worship life of the Old Testament. All the sacrifices and offerings in the Temple had a significant olfactory component, these include:

- The Burnt Offering
- The Meal or Grain Offering (a cooked bread offering)
- The Peace Offering, which contributed in part to the Burnt Offering
- The Sin Offering, which included burning the fat of the offering and burning the offering until ashes.
- The Trespass Offering, which had the same procedure as the Sin Offering.

Not only did these offerings all have these olfactory components, but also incense played a significant role in the worship life of Israel. There was an incense offering that was offered as part of the priestly liturgy and therefore as part of the purification of Israel. Some of the ingredients to the offering are well known to us, myrrh and frankincense appear in Matthew’s nativity story and these are two of the four parts of the incense offering. The other two parts are שחלית *shechelech* and galbanum.

Hebrew scholars and theologians disagree on what *shechelech* actually is¹ but we do know that its purpose, along with the other items, is to produce a strong pleasant smelling perfume. The idea is that these items create a unique aroma that was to be used exclusively in the ritual of offering. This meant that the smell would be unique to the Holy Place in the Temple and for the purpose of meeting with God!

¹ Some attribute the description of *shechelech* to the trap door of sea snails, or even a cuttlefish bone. However, as both of these animals considered unclean animals (Lev. 11:9 & 12) this is unlikely. According to the Talmud, *shechelech* is not a tree but does grow in the ground and is a type of plant (Kerithoth 6b). Abrahams, H.J. - Onycha, Ingredient of the ancient Jewish incense: An attempt at identification in Econ. Bot. 33(2): 233-6 1979

“Grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the ark of the covenant law in the tent of meeting, where I will meet with you.”

Exodus 30:36



Read Hebrews 9:1-14

In this passage, the author of Hebrews explains how the Deuteronomical sacrifices really were intended for a previous covenant. While Jews today argue that the sacrifices in the Old Testament are more about worship than propitiation (restitution in order to garner pardon), even a basic reading of the sacrifices in Leviticus 1-7 demonstrates that their purpose was the expiation of sin. Consequently, modern Jews living in the post-Temple period (after 70 AD), where there is no Temple to make sacrifices, have substituted the sacrifices with prayer. They quote Hosea 14:3, where the original Hebrew text describe prayer as akin to the sacrifices of oxen². The פָּרִים *parim* sacrifice was the atonement offering for the sin of the world (Ex. 29).

However, this does not deny the reality of Hebrews 9 – that even if we attempt to come to God without the atoning sacrifice of Jesus we are only operating in the *shadow* of Heavenly things. The sacrifices, like the Law, are a reminder of our limitations as sinners, a bondage that was lifted in Christ. In the New Covenant wrought in His blood.



Start a conversation over a cup or tea or coffee about peoples' views of the Old Testament Law Covenant and the New Covenant in Christ.

² The oldest version agreed version of the Old Testament has been the Septuagint Koine Greek text – which uses the word *fruits* for פָּרִים *parim*. However, the Dead Sea Scroll 4Q78 of Hosea has the word פָּרִים *parim*. As the Dead Sea Scrolls predate the Septuagint, this leads us to conclude that Hosea originally contained this idea that prayers are like the sacrificial offering of bulls.



Questions

In Hebrews 9, the author describes ‘external regulations’ (Heb. 9:10), how is this different from what Christ commands us as His Followers?

What does the author of Hebrews mean when they say ‘these are copies of Heavenly things’ (Heb. 9:23)?

Discuss:

In what way do you think our prayers *can* be like the Old Testament sacrifices? In what way are they not?

Reflect on the significance of Myrrh and Frankincense being part of the incense offering and being offered to Jesus in the Nativity Story (Matt. 2:11)?
