

The Ninth Hour

By Kevin M. Williams

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We read in Acts 3:1 “Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour.” Read in passing, we can gather that Kefa and Yochanon (their Hebrew names) were headed up Mount Zion at about 3:00 in the afternoon. This was a time-honored tradition the rabbis tell us goes all the way back to Isaac. “And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide.”¹

During the period of the second temple, the ninth hour had become wrapped in ritual and significance. As with many Hebrew observances, one only has to look a little while before encountering word pictures and metaphors that point to the person and purpose of Messiah. Join me as we go on an excursion, away from this temporal existence back to the period when Jesus walked the earth.

Imagine if you will, that you are a Levite. You’re wearing your white linen robe, and you place the priestly turban upon your head. With practiced familiarity, you walk from the Southwest Chamber out into the Court of Priests in Herod the Great’s Temple. The majesty of the temple complex still stuns you, as the golden Holy Place—where the ark of the Lord resides—gleams in the late afternoon sun. All around you are other priests busy about their work—for it is nearly the ninth hour.

Directly before you, the ramp, leading up to the altar, beyond that, a little to your right, is the Holy Place where the Most High dwells.

The shofars, the ram’s horns, blare as the doors to your far right thrust open and the High Priest steps out into the late-day sun. It is time to fulfill God’s holy Torah, “The one lamb thou shalt offer in the morning; and the other lamb thou shalt offer at even.”² His vestments of gold and jewels shimmer a dazzling array of colors and glory. The golden crown he wears reads, “Holy unto the LORD” and gleams like fire on his head.

A stream of other priests pour in through gates to the south, the north, and the east. Beyond these great bronze doors, you can see throngs of Israelites, milling about expectantly. Across the court, a chorus begins, singing from Psalm 66:15-20:

I will offer unto thee burnt sacrifices of fatlings, with the incense of rams; I will offer bullocks with goats. Selah. Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul. I cried unto him with my mouth, and he was extolled with my tongue. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me: But verily God hath heard me; he hath attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me.

The Cohen Gadol, the High Priest, approaches the great altar. A female lamb is brought forth, innocent and without blemish. It is the last sacrifice of the day—the *asham* offering—the *sin offering* that atones for all the sins the Hebrew people were ignorant of committing. Such a God we serve! To cover even our ignorance!



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With accomplished skill, the neck is cut, the blood spilled, and the life drained. Speedily, the body of the young animal is dressed and placed on the altar, its fat burning a dark smoke that rises toward the heavens—a pleasing aroma.

Soon, the High Priest turns and utters the familiar words, “It is finished.” Israel’s sins have been atoned.

The courtyard fills with more Levites as the High Priest now moves toward the Holy Place. He carries with him, a pan of coals from the brazen altar and steps quickly through the gold-plated double-doors that lead into the holy place. These doors are so heavy it takes ten men on each to push them closed.

The final sacrifice has been made, but the day is not yet over. This is the time everyone has been waiting for. Peering back through doors into the outer court, the men have stopped moving, and stare up over the wall, in the direction of the Holy Place. They too, wait.

You cast your eyes to the Holy Place, lifting a hand over your eyes to shield them from the glare. Any minute now the incense will be burned.

Then suddenly, at the first sign of smoke from the Holy Place, the multitudes fall to their knees with their faces on the floor. The choir has stopped. The ram’s horns have grown silent. The smoke rises from the Holy Place and a scent fills the air—the sacred incense is being burned. As frankincense, myrrh, cinnamon, cassia, and the smell of other herbs and spices fill your nostrils you once again become aware of your surroundings. All is still. There is no noise, no talking. It is the ninth hour and all of Israel is in prayerful communion with the Creator.

The words of King David come into your mind as you face the floor and direct your heart toward God; “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”³

For the next half-hour, no one will stir from their prone positions. No one will speak. The priest and the commoner, the rich and the poor, all are equal before God in prayer.

* * *

Our friends, Peter and John would have been outside the Court of the Priests with the other Israelites. They wouldn’t have witnessed the grandeur and majesty of the High Priest entering the Holy Place. But if going to the temple for afternoon prayer was their habit, they would have experienced the same daily expectation at the ninth hour. They would have joined all their brethren in looking over the wall, and waiting for the column of smoke—the burning incense—and they would have knelt in solemn prayer.

Many people are under the impression that the temple was all about sacrifices. Certainly the offerings were an important aspect of the daily ritual in that most auspicious of places, the place God chose to establish His name. The sacrifices were crucial in fact, but they were only steps in a process. The goal was to reach the ninth hour—the incense offering—the time of prayer.

Biblically, many events took place at the ninth hour:

Joshua 7:6-10 And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the **eventide**, he and the elders of Israel, . . . And the LORD said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore **liest thou thus upon thy face?**

1 Kings 18:36, 38 And it came to pass **at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice**, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. **And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces:** and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God.”

Daniel 9:21 Yea, whiles I was speaking in prayer, even the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me **about the time of the evening oblation.**

Ezra 9:5-6 And at the **evening sacrifice** I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, **I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God,** And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.

Acts 10:30, 31 And Cornelius said, “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and **at the ninth hour I prayed in my house**, and, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, And said, Cornelius, thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa, and call hither Simon, whose surname is Peter.”

The most relevant passage for those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah follows:

Matthew 27:45-51 Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto **the ninth hour**. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice . . . and yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.

At the time of the ninth hour, is it merely a coincidence that Jesus mirrored the words of the High Priest who offered up the sin offering, “It is finished”? Is it merely a coincidence that, with the rending of the temple veil, He who became our sin offering⁴ opened the way for us into the Holy of Holies, into the presence of the Most High God? Is it a coincidence that—like our Hebrew brethren of old—we have the freedom to come before Him in prayer?

In the Talmud,⁵ in *Tractate Tamid*, it says that a person could smell the holy incense offered at the temple as far away as Jericho—about 50 miles. There are references in another set of commentaries called the *Zohar*, that the aroma from the holy incense was so strong, that women in Jerusalem didn’t bother wearing perfume.

Because we are so far removed culturally, and somewhat limited by our own experiences, we might miss another lesson. Living in Jerusalem, a person could not escape the smell of the incense offering. When the afternoon sacrifice was over, when the incense was burned, everyone knew it. If you wanted, you could refuse to *see* the Lord in your life and never visit the temple. If you were so inclined, you could refuse to *listen* to the Lord and His Word. But potentially as far away as Jericho, His sweet-smelling aroma was invasive. How like our God, to woo us to Him!

C.W. Slemming has another potent illustration of the incense offering:

I have sometimes thought of this little piece of furniture [the incense altar] standing before the veil as an electric plug such as we use to tap the electric power laid behind our walls. Behind the veil of the tabernacle was the Shekinah Glory of the presence of the Lord, and behind the veil of the sky are all the resources of the great triune Godhead. By putting in the plug of prayer with the hand of faith, we are able to tap those resources and find that “prayer changes things.”⁵

Slemming ties the scent and ritual of the incense directly into the power of prayer. I think we’ve already demonstrated that the two are inextricably linked. The myriad of Hebrews at the temple would fall on their faces every day for prayer. To use Slemming’s illustration, they were “plugged-in!” Add to this what we have talked about, that prayer can be an invasive aroma, and we have a powerful picture of prayer, indeed!

This always makes me pause and ask myself the same question, “What is the state of my prayer life?”

What about your prayers? Do they have the attitude of someone *plugged-in*? Are they offered up daily? Are they offered up confidently, that we are righteous before God? Do they rise up to heaven before the very throne of God as a sweet-smelling aroma? Do your prayers permeate the world around you as the incense permeated the miles surrounding Jerusalem?

The incense offering and subsequent prayer-time was nearly the final act of the day. Only one more service would be carried out by the High Priest, to pronounce the blessing from Numbers 6:24-26:

*The LORD bless thee, and keep thee:
The LORD make his face shine upon thee,
and be gracious unto thee:
The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee,
and give thee peace.*

This, if you will, draws a prophetic picture for us. Compare these two texts, the first from Bible scholar Alfred Edersheim, the other from the book of Revelation.

“The whole multitude of the people without withdrew from the inner court, and fell down before the Lord, spreading their hands in silent prayer. It is this most solemn period, when throughout the vast Temple buildings deep silence rested on the worshipping multitude, while within the sanctuary itself the priest laid the incense on the golden altar and the cloud of ‘odours’ rose up before the Lord”⁷

“And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets. And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand.”⁸

I think that, if God follows His own established pattern, it is very possible that these events in Revelation will take place—at about the ninth hour. What a day that shall be!

Perhaps you view this panoramic view of the temple and the incense service as interesting, and of some academic interest, but nonetheless, done away with in the New Testament era. In this author's opinion, the incense offering has not been done away with. Certainly the physical structure of the temple in Jerusalem is gone, but the spiritual principle of the service remains. It has not been abrogated, but translated.

If we are the temple⁹, if we are the priesthood¹⁰, then the responsibility resides with us—God's redeemed community. Through the everlasting sacrifice, we have been drawn near¹¹ to God and invited to enter into relationship and service with Him.

Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.¹²

We, the priesthood, offer up our prayers, the smoke and the pleasing aroma that should invade and infuse the world around us, and, reach the throne of the Most High. The temple is no longer structurally bound to a mountain in Israel. The temple, represented by Messiah's body of believers, has been given feet. The pervasive scent of holiness is no longer land-locked in Jerusalem and apparent in Jericho, but has moved onto every continent, and into every tribe and nation.

The service was not done away with, but instilled in us. We have a mission and a purpose. We must be about our duties as God's holy priests because one day soon, before the throne of God, we shall visibly witness the pouring out of the incense. We, shall see our prayers on the heavenly altar, and we shall all share in that most solemn half-hour of silence, eagerly anticipating the Great and Awesome Day of the Lord and the establishment of His kingdom here on earth!

Endnotes

¹ Genesis 24:63

² Exodus 29:39

³ Psalm 141:2

⁴ Isaiah 53:10

⁵ A set of rabbinic commentaries compiled in the 6th Century CE

⁶ *Made According to Pattern*, by C.W. Slemming, 1938, Christian Literature Crusade: p.114: brackets mine

⁷ *The Temple*, Alfred Edersheim, 1994, Eerdmans, p. 167

⁸ Revelation 8:1-4

⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:16

¹⁰ 1 Peter 2:9

¹¹ Hebrews 10:22

¹² 1 Corinthians 10:13-14

Kevin M. Williams, Litt. D., H.L.D. has served in Messianic ministries since 1987, planting indigenous Messianic Jewish congregations with the purpose of reaching God's Chosen with the good news. He is a leader at Adat Etz Chayim (Tree of Life Congregation) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and is on full-time staff with RBC Ministries. Kevin has written numerous articles and been a featured speaker at regional and international conferences on Messianic Judaism.