

- b. The alien teachings the writer referred to encouraged these Hebrews to seek resource and strength for their walk with the Lord through *foods*, which he insisted are of no benefit, because all such things were symbolic provisions during the time of preparation. They were merely shadows whose substance has come in the Messiah to whom they pointed and concerning whom they gave instruction (ref. 9:1-10; cf. Colossians 2:16-17). These food provisions, like everything associated with Israel's life under the Law of Moses, were christological pointers. This was the case with Israel's dietary prescriptions, but also of the "meats" associated with the priestly ministration, and that seems to be what the writer was referring to here: *We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat*" (13:10).

The first thing to emphasize is that the author was speaking *metaphorically*, contrasting the covenant resource supplied to Jesus' disciples with that given to the children of Israel under the Law of Moses. The Levitical priestly system mediated the relationship between Yahweh and His covenant people, so that His provision in that relationship flowed to them through the ministration of the priesthood. And the various *altars* prescribed by the Law of Moses symbolized the place, circumstance, and resultant benefit of that ministration.

Thus the writer wasn't saying that Christians have their own literal altar for approaching God and worshipping Him. *Indeed, one of the things that was so puzzling about the early Christians is that they claimed to worship and serve the true and living God, and yet had no sacerdotal apparatus or practice*; they had no temples, altars, priests or sacrificial rituals. In the ancient world, this was unheard of, for all religious belief and practice was oriented around ritual worship and sacrifices, and such ritual practice was fundamental to a community's identity and self-knowledge. Even Judaism, for all its quirky distinctives, was recognizable to the pagan world as a religious faith directed toward a particular deity.

No, the writer employed this imagery because he knew it would be effective in making his point to his Jewish audience. Here, he was specifically referring to the eating of sacrificial foods as part of Israel's priestly ministration ("eating from the altar"). Under the Law of Moses, certain sacrifices provided food for the priests, and sometimes also for the offerer. This was the case with the *grain* offering, *guilt* offering and *peace* offering (Leviticus 2, 3, 7). The priests also ate the meat of the *sin* offering, but only in instances where the blood of the offering wasn't brought into Yahweh's sanctuary, as it was, for example, on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). In those instances, the sacrificed animal wasn't eaten; its body was burned outside the camp (13:11; cf. Leviticus 4:1-21, 8:1-9:11, 16:1-27, 19:1-6). The writer likely had Yom Kippur in mind, but his point is the same regardless: The priests who minister in the temple (here, *tabernacle*) are not allowed to eat the flesh of Israel's sin offerings, but they are equally disallowed from eating the sin offering that Jesus presented. This is because they have no share in Him, and yet this "meat" *is* provided as food to those who embrace Him. Put simply, *all who participate in Israel's altar have no share in the altar of Christ's sacrifice*.

The writer drew on the law of the sin offering to underscore the absolute distinction between Mosaic Judaism and the New Covenant administration in the Messiah. The former has now become “alien teaching,” not by abrogation or alteration, but *fulfillment*. The shadow has yielded to the substance, so that all who try to cling to the shadow are actually clinging to nothing, even as they are denying the true substance. So Israel’s sin offerings, in all of their particulars, have been fulfilled in Jesus’ self-offering (13:12-14). He fulfilled them in both aspects: the priest who presents the offering and the offering itself. He shed His own blood to sanctify His people, which He then presented to His Father, as it were, not in the earthly sanctuary, but “*the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands*” (9:11-12). And being the true sin offering whose blood is brought into God’s presence, Jesus also had His body disposed of “outside the camp.” But in His case, there are two crucial differences:

- 1) First, Jesus’ disposal “outside the camp” included the *suffering* that culminated in His death. Israel’s sin offerings were slain at the doorway of the tabernacle (or temple), and then the dead carcass was burned outside the camp; Jesus was slain outside the holy city away from the temple.
- 2) Secondly, the carcasses of Israel’s sin offerings were burned outside the camp – away from Yahweh’s presence – to signify their *uncleanness* (cf. Leviticus 16:27-28 with Leviticus 4, 13, 24:10-14; also Numbers 5:1-4, 12:1-15, 19:1-10). The blood was presented to the Lord as an offering of atonement, but the defilement associated with the sin of the offerer was imparted to the flesh of the sacrificed animal. Hence it was to be completely consumed by fire in a designated place.

Jesus’ ordeal outside the camp also involved uncleanness, which the writer hinted at when he mentioned His *reproach* (13:13). From the vantage point of His Israelite accusers, it was entirely appropriate that Jesus should die on the unclean hill of Golgotha outside the holy city, for He was a blasphemer and enemy of Israel’s God and His Torah. And yet, this, too, was a crucial aspect of His fulfillment of Israel’s sacrificial system. As the carcass of the sin offering bore the offerer’s defilement, so Jesus was appointed to bear the reproach of Israel and the nations (10:1-9). The Jews were right in assigning uncleanness to Jesus, but they didn’t recognize that He was carrying the defilement of *their* sin and rebellion. As the spotless animal selected for a sin offering was defiled by its association with the sins of its human counterpart, so it was with the sacrifice of Yahweh’s messianic Servant: “*By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities*” (Isaiah 53:11).

Thus there is both paradox and irony in the tapestry the Hebrews writer wove together from this sacrificial imagery, and out of it he issued his next exhortation: “*Hence, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach, for here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking that which is to come*” (13:13-14).

Jerusalem, with the temple at its center, was God's holy city and the focal point of Israel's life and worship. Thus, Jesus being driven from Jerusalem (the "camp") to Golgotha spoke powerfully of Israel's rejection of Him as a traitor to God and His Law. But the way people viewed Him, they also viewed His followers (John 15:18-21). In the case of the unbelieving Jews, they regarded Jesus' Israelite disciples (including the recipients of this epistle) as fellow sharers in His apostasy and uncleanness. Just like the false messiah they followed, these Israelites had forsaken Yahweh, and so needed to be persuaded, by whatever means, to "wash" themselves and so return to the "camp" of Israel.

This was the thinking of Jesus' Jewish detractors, but the writer wanted his readers to understand that it was these individuals who actually were unclean and separated from the covenant household. For Yahweh was now reconstituting His people in His resurrected Son, and cleansing from sin was now obtained through His death as the singular sin offering that the Levitical counterparts only prefigured. In an astonishing and ironic twist, a Jew now needed to *leave* the camp of Israel in order to find cleansing, and consecration to Israel's God involved rejecting the temple and its ordinances and owning the reproach that fell upon the One who Himself is Yahweh's true and everlasting sanctuary.

And if the temple had served its purpose and found its fulfillment in Jesus, the same was true of the holy city in which it sat. God had long before marked out Jerusalem as the city where He would place His name forever (cf. 1 Kings 9:1-3; 2 Chronicles 33:1-7), but this pledge, too, had found its essential truth in His messianic Servant, just as the prophets had hinted (cf. Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-12). The Messiah was now the point where heaven and earth converged, and where the God of all the earth was to be encountered and worshipped (ref. 1:3, 8-12; cf. John 1:14-18, 14:1-7). Jerusalem and its temple no longer served that function; to the contrary, they were utterly defiled because of the corruption of the priests, rulers, and people (cf. Luke 19:45-46; Galatians 4:19-28; Revelation 11:8).

Those who expelled Jesus from the "camp" didn't recognize this (John 11:45-50), but their God did, and very soon He would destroy the unclean city and its cherished sanctuary (Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 19:28-46, 21:5-22). It's not clear whether the Hebrews writer saw this coming, but he recognized the truth that there is no enduring city in this present world; the everlasting habitation Yahweh pledged is the new Jerusalem that has come down from heaven in the incarnate Son (13:14, also 12:26-27). This renewed Zion is gathering her children, and will one day encompass all creation (cf. Isaiah 53-55; Revelation 21-22).

And so it is that God's true children have the New Jerusalem as their mother, and they, like her, are *free*. But this freedom obliges them to never return to the yoke of slavery, whatever form it may take, and however appealing its inducements. Jesus' brethren have found freedom outside the camp – outside the enslaving patterns and persuasions of the former fallen order, Jewish or otherwise. And having found freedom with Him in that place of reproach, they must remain there.