

The next major section of *Hebrews* runs from 8:1-10:18. In her study Frances Taylor Gench covers this section in three parts, each one dealing with a different subject: *The Day of Atonement*, *Shadow and Reality*, and *The New Covenant*. Gench regards the whole passage as “the main point” of the letter. We shall follow a similar pattern too, but perhaps not in quite the same way.

To be brief, the point is the self-sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the world. That witness had been made before by the apostle Paul (Gal. 2:30; Rom. 3:25) and in Mark 10:45. It had also been the subject of other late 1st and early 2nd century C.E. authors (Eph. 5:2; 1 John 2:2; 1 Pet. 2:24; 1 Tim. 2:5-6). From this we can deduce that the issue was very much alive at the time when *Hebrews* was written.

In the background of the passage were two memories of events in the religious history of all Jews: the sacrifices offered in the temple by the high priest on the Day of Atonement; and the death of Jesus Christ on the cross followed by his resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God. *Hebrews* attempted to meld these two events into a sound interpretation of what Jewish Christians experienced through faith.

It is noteworthy that 8:8-13 is made up entirely of a single quotation from the Hebrews scriptures. It is also important to recall that the recipients of the letter were most likely Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora in the early 90s C.E. who were struggling to adapt to two basic issues: the growing tension between rabbinic Judaism in their synagogues and the absence of the temple in Jerusalem with its sacrificial forms of worship as the focal point of the Hebrew religious tradition.

Another important aspect of this passage is the meaning of God’s renewed covenant with Israel. Because they were continually breaking the terms of this covenant set forth

in the Torah, Jews had developed the annual liturgy for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

The ritual involved fasting, prayer and self-examination seeking reconciliation with God. The ceremony also included the sacrifice of two sacred animals, a pure lamb and a scapegoat. On this day once a year, the lamb was killed and its blood sprinkled on the people, the high priest and in the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum symbolizing the presence of God.

At the same time, a red ribbon symbolizing the sins of the people was tied to the horns of a goat which was then sent off into the wilderness to wander until death. This double ritual was observed annually, thereby effecting the cleansing of the people and atonement with God.

Hebrews did not explain how this happened. It was simply accepted as a means of God’s grace as a way of dealing with sin and maintaining the purity of the place where Israel met and reconciled with God. During their wandering in the wilderness, this ceremony had taken place in the tabernacle, or tent of meeting. After the building of the temple in Jerusalem, it had been celebrated there. The temple disappeared in 70 C.E.

The extensive quotation in 8:8-13 sought to show that Jesus’ self-sacrifice had made the former ritual unnecessary because the earlier annual covenant renewal had been faulty. On the other hand, Jesus’ death established a new and better covenant that could not and need not be repeated annually.

The quotation was taken from Jeremiah 31:31-34. For Christians this was perhaps the most important prophecy in the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures. It remains so to the present time and is still featured in the traditional ritual of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, also known as the Eucharist or Holy Communion.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Traditionally, a covenant is said to be the highest form of relationship benefiting both parties, but also the most conditional of all. Why was it essential to renew annually Israel's covenant with God?
2. The election of Israel by God's grace alone was the essence of God's covenant with both Abraham and Moses. How would the inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian community have complicated the covenantal process Jewish for Christians?
3. In what way do you feel that the inclusion of other faith traditions in the Christian relationship with God through faith essential in our time?
4. Blood sacrifice was an essential part of many religious traditions in ancient times. Is there still a similarity between the celebration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, Holy Communion, and/or the Roman Catholic Mass?

CLOSING PRAYER

God will never fail us, God will not forsake;
for this eternal covenant God will never break.
Resting on the promise, what have we to fear?
God is all sufficient for the coming year. We
thank you, O God for whatever lies ahead.
Amen.

11 – THE PERFECT SACRIFICE – Part 1

Hebrews 8: 1-13.



A YEMENI RABBI SOUNDING THE SHOFAR

OPENING PRAYER

Standing at the portal of the opening year,
words of comfort meet us, hushing every fear;
spoken through the silence by our Savior's voice,
tender, strong and faithful, making us rejoice. We
praise you, O God for the year ahead. Amen.