

Incense in Worship

"You are to make an altar for the burning of incense; make it of acacia wood... There is to be an incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations." - Exodus 30:1, 8 HCSB

Hashem ordered His people to make incense a regular part of their worship experience on numerous occasions¹ going so far as to actually give the specific ingredients to a formula that was to be strictly dedicated to tabernacle use.² He even gave the exact dimensions and materials that were to go in an altar of incense.³ Not only was incense part and parcel with both the tabernacle and the temple, but offerings of incense were considered a normal act of worship.⁴

However, no unauthorized person outside of the Levites could actually burn the incense in offering to the Lord.⁵ Jeroboam did not heed this command, choosing to make up his own festivals and rituals and offering incense of his own making on an altar in Bethel⁶ and found himself roundly rebuked by the Lord for his hubris.⁷

His attitude of "self-made religion" was taken up by the people who started offering incense in their own ways and places.⁸ Because they weren't obeying, they ended up worshipping gods of their own making and reaped the consequences of their foolish pride.⁹

King Uzziah was also so lifted up in pride because of his power and acted unfaithfully against the Lord his God by going into the sanctuary to burn incense on the altar. The priests tried to warn him but he grew enraged when they said only descendents of Aaron could offer the incense and was immediately struck with a skin disease.¹⁰ In contrast, King Hezekiah was blessed for recognizing the Levites' place as the "burners of incense"¹¹ and for systematically removing all other forms of incense worship.¹²

Clearly, incense was not completely forbidden even to the Old Covenant godly for "oil and incense bring joy to the heart"¹³ but that was not within the context of tabernacle or temple worship. And obviously, even incense burned in the temple by Levites was abominable to the Lord God if the people's hearts weren't right.¹⁴ Interestingly, it was during the offering of incense that the birth of our Master was announced.¹⁵

However, under the New Covenant there is no longer a distinction between Jews and Goyim among the believers¹⁶ and we are now all part of the "royal priesthood."¹⁷ The veil separating the Holy of Holies that prevented all but the High Priest has been torn down¹⁸ and we may now all boldly approach our Father's throne.¹⁹ Though Hashem primarily considers our prayers as incense before the Lord²⁰, I don't think that anything prevents believers from incorporating incense in their daily or corporate worship as long as they don't start focusing on the externals to the detriment of their hearts.

¹ Exodus 25:2-6; 31:11; 35:8, 15, 28; 40:27; Leviticus 16:12-13; Numbers 16:17; Deuteronomy 33:10

² Exodus 30:34-38

³ Exodus 30:1 cp 37:25

⁴ Numbers 7:14, 20, 26, 32, 38, 44, 50, 56, 62, 68, 74, 80, 86; 2 Chronicles 2:6

⁵ Numbers 16:40; 1 Samuel 2:28; 1 Chronicles 6:49; 23:13

⁶ 1 Kings 12:33

⁷ 1 Kings 13:1-2

⁸ 1 Kings 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3; 14:4; 15:4, 35; 16:4; 17:11; 18:4; 2 Chronicles 13:9-11; Isaiah 65:3, 7; 66:3; Jeremiah 1:16; 11:13; 18:15

⁹ 2 Kings 22:17; 23:5; cp Romans 1:21-23

¹⁰ 2 Chronicles 26:14-21

¹¹ 2 Chronicles 29:1-11

¹² 2 Chronicles 30:14; 32:12; 34:4, 7

¹³ Proverbs 27:9

¹⁴ Isaiah 1:13

¹⁵ Luke 1:9-11

¹⁶ Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11

¹⁷ 1 Peter 2:9

¹⁸ Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45

¹⁹ Hebrews 4:16

²⁰ Psalm 141:2; Revelation 5:8; 8:3-5