

PRAYING TOWARD JERUSALEM

INSIGHTS FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE

For many years the Jews of the synagogue have directed their prayers toward Jerusalem the home of the Temple that once stood within her walls. The questions that we must ask are “where did this tradition originate”, and “does this tradition have validity for today”? Just because a tradition has been followed for many years does not automatically mean that it should be accepted and followed. Every tradition should be examined to see if it passes Biblical muster and the tradition of praying toward Jerusalem is no different.

The first place we see the idea praying toward to the Temple, located in Jerusalem, is in I Kings Chapter Eight. In this chapter King Solomon is praying a prayer of dedication on behalf of the Temple and in his prayer he addresses both the prayers of the foreigner and the native Israelite. In I Kings 8:38 and 42 Solomon asks that when the foreigner addresses his prayers toward the Temple in Jerusalem that G-d would hear the prayer and answer the prayer of the foreigner. Solomon seems to expect the possibility that foreigners would one day follow the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and while in distant lands would want to direct their prayers toward Jerusalem. The only conceivable reason that one would desire to direct their prayers toward Jerusalem comes from a belief that the Temple is the residence of G-d on earth. In I Kings 8:44 and 48 Solomon now directs his attention toward the native Israelite and asks for them just what he asked for the foreigner. It was Solomon’s hope that all men, whether Jew or Gentile, would one day focus their attention on the city of Jerusalem and the Temple which stood for the presence of G-d. While admittedly an argument from silence, nowhere do we find that Solomon is rebuked for putting forward the idea of praying toward Jerusalem.

The next major occurrence of the idea of praying toward Jerusalem occurs in several of the Psalms. The Psalms were the liturgy of the Temple and so it should come as no surprise that the idea of praying toward the Temple is a theme taken up in the Psalms. For example Psalm 28:2 states, “Hear the voice of my supplications when I cry to Thee for help, when I lift up my hands toward Thy Holy sanctuary”. In Psalm 138:2 the psalmist writes, “I will bow down toward Thy Holy Temple and give thanks to Thy name...” Just as one would bow within the Temple if personally attending (Psalm 5:7), so too was the individual who could not be in proximity to the Temple encouraged to direct their prayers toward the city/temple. While these texts in Psalms are short of commanding one to direct their prayers toward Jerusalem they do at least encourage the believer to think about Jerusalem and the Temple when they pray.

There is one Psalm at least that does command us to pray for Jerusalem and that occurs in Psalm 122:6. This Psalm says that we should “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” and what better way to remember the Holy City and the Temple that housed the presence of G-d than to direct our prayers in that direction.

With the prayer of Solomon and the encouragement of the Psalms as a foundation the question that arises is “do we ever see any believer actually praying toward Jerusalem in response to these Scriptures”? The answer to this question is a resounding Yes!! In

Daniel 6:10 we see in Daniel a man that prayed three times a day and a man that directed his prayers toward Jerusalem. We must remember that during Daniel's time the Temple of Solomon had been destroyed and the Temple of Herod was yet to be erected. During the intervening period of standing Temples, Daniel regularly directed his prayers toward Jerusalem as a way of acknowledging the G-d of his fathers.

One last thought in regard to praying toward the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. In his book "The Ancient Synagogue" author Lee Levine tells us that many of the ancient synagogues were built so that when people prayed they were facing east—the direction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Both Yeshua and Paul attended the synagogue on a regular basis and never once do we hear them condemn the idea of facing east or directing ones prayers toward the Temple. What does it say about our fellow brothers and sisters in Messiah who thought it important enough to construct their synagogues with an orientation toward the Temple/Jerusalem? Perhaps we who are Messianics should give due consideration to the direction we pray in concert with our fellow brothers and sisters of the ancient synagogue.

With the blessing of Solomon, the encouragement of the Psalms, and the precedent of Daniel (along with the builders of the synagogue) I believe we who call Yeshua our Lord should direct our minds and bodies toward Jerusalem—the home of our G-d—and towards the Temple—the dwelling place of His presence. Since we are commanded to pray for Jerusalem what better way to fulfill this command than to move our minds and bodies eastward when we pray.