

## Hebrews 13:9-10

### “Strange Teachings Associated With Foods”

“Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were so occupied were not benefited. We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.”

Hebrews 13:9-10 is a frequently referenced passage, alongside of Mark 7, Acts chs. 10 and 11, Romans 14, Colossians 2:16-17, or 1 Timothy 4:1-5, to claim that the kosher dietary laws of the Torah are a thing of the previous, pre-resurrection era.<sup>1</sup> Most Messianic people, when encountering Hebrews 3:9-10 quoted to them, are caught completely off guard, and do not know what to do. While it is common for various Christian examiners to conclude that Hebrews 13:9-10 demonstrates a negative disposition toward *kashrut*, it needs to be observed that there is a wide number of Hebrews commentators who are hesitant to draw such a conclusion, and are not so sure that clean and unclean meats is the issue being referred to. It cannot go unnoticed how there are those, who while thinking that the dietary laws are in view for 9:8-10 previously, do not think that they are in view here, and would definitely propose that something more targeted for Hebrews' audience needs to be considered.

A rather general approach to the issue described here, as stated by the *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, is that “‘Ceremonial foods’ is a reference to the legalistic teachings of the Judaizers (see the note on Gal 1:7).”<sup>2</sup> Pamela Eisenbaum interjects the still rather general statement, in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, “Regulations about food [is] perhaps a reference to Jewish dietary laws or to the issue of meat offered to idols (see Act 15; 1 Cor 8).”<sup>3</sup> Another thought, as noted by B.B. Blue in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments*, is that “This may be a reference to partaking in Jewish cultic meals.”<sup>4</sup> It needs to be steadfastly remembered, as William L. Lane directs, that “Vv 9-14 constitute one of the most controversial passages in Hebrews. The major thrust of the text easily becomes lost in the obscurities of proposals and counter-proposals.”<sup>5</sup> Paul Ellingworth similarly sates,

“Vv. 9-14 have given rise to a wide variety of interpretations, and a final choice between them cannot be made until the whole passage has been examined. The basic problem arises. . .because the writer refers allusively to a situation which was well known to the first readers, but of which modern readers are largely ignorant.”<sup>6</sup>

The Christian layreader of Hebrews 13:9-10 is most likely to see the author's reference to “foods,” and then immediately conclude that the dietary code of the Law of Moses is being disparaged. The Messianic reader of Hebrews 13:9-10, even with what is in view involving “varied and strange teachings,” is not too likely to know what to do with

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<sup>1</sup> This section has been adapted and significantly expanded from the commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic* (2006) by J.K. McKee.

<sup>2</sup> Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Eisenbaum, in *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 425.

<sup>4</sup> B.B. Blue, “Food, Food Laws, Table-Fellowship,” in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 379.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 47:b:530.

<sup>6</sup> Ellingworth, 705.

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this passage. Various Hebrews commentators, as will be seen, have offered some useful perspectives regarding what might have been the problem for the epistle's First Century recipients.

13:9 Among the closing statements in his letter, the author of Hebrews directs, "Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace—not by foods that have not benefited those occupied by them" (TLV). The writer has rightly placed a priority on a transformation of the human heart from one that is wicked (3:8, 10) to regenerated (8:10; 10:16). Somehow for those among his audience, there were various "outlandish teachings" (NEB) or practices circulating, which placed an unnecessary emphasis on "foods" (*brōmasin*, βρώμασιν). This may have involved some sort of over-exaggeration or hyper-inflated importance given to Tanach sentiments about being filled with God's bounty, such as that witnessed in Psalm 104:14-15:

"He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the labor of man, so that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine which makes man's heart glad, so that he may make *his* face glisten with oil, and food which sustains man's heart."

The author warns his audience to be aware of *Didachais poikilais kai xenais* (Διδαχαῖς ποικίλαις καὶ ξέναις), "diverse and strange teachings" (RSV), with two notable adjectives employed to describe this problem. The first, *poikilos* (ποικίλος), can mean "changeful, various, diversified, manifold," and Aristotle actually used it to mean "unstable" (LS).<sup>7</sup> The second, and probably more important for determining context, is *xenos* (ξένος), meaning "foreign," "because it comes from an external source" (BDAG).<sup>8</sup> *Didachais poikilais kai xenais* can be rendered as "varied and foreign teachings," with Lattimore notably having, "strange and complex teachings." This is a good indication that there were viewpoints originating from outside Hebrews' faith community, which were errantly influencing the thoughts and beliefs of some people, getting their focus off of the grace of Yeshua the Messiah.

Many lay readers and various interpreters, automatically assume that the reference to "foods" in v. 9 is to the dietary laws of the Torah. This has not been helped by *brōmasin*, correctly just left as "foods," extrapolated by various versions as: "ceremonial foods" (NIV), "regulations about food" (NRSV), "regulations regarding food" (Montgomery New Testament), "rules of diet" (Phillips New Testament), "rules about what we eat" (Kingdom New Testament), or "scruples about what we eat" (NEB).

Resources on Hebrews are divided in two between those which advocate that "foods" refers to the Torah's instructions on clean and unclean meats, versus those which connect "foods" to something else which negatively affected Hebrews' audience. Among the latter, the strange and odd teachings circulating are thought to have involved some kind of syncretism, which probably took advantage of ancient Jewish practices and customs, enabling some to forget about the ultimate sacrifice and grace of Israel's Messiah. The chart below has classified interpreters who think that the reference to "foods" in v. 9 is to the kosher dietary laws, and those who think that it needs to be read a bit more carefully against what "all kinds of strange teachings" (NRSV) might have been:

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<sup>7</sup> LS, 652.

<sup>8</sup> BDAG, 684.

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HEBREW 13:9	
“FOODS” = DIETARY LAWS	“FOODS” ASSOCIATED WITH STRANGE TEACHINGS
<p>“Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:3-20 listed ‘unclean’ foods that Jewish people were to avoid, thus differentiating them from the nations around them. Philo allegorized these food laws but argued that one should still keep them literally; at the same time, he also testifies that some extremely *Hellenized Jewish people in his day viewed them as only symbolic and did not practice them. The writer of Hebrews does not reject them by interpreting them nonliterally; he simply believes that a new time has come, and the foods previously forbidden did not directly benefit those who abstained, making the prohibitions no longer necessary.”<sup>9</sup></p> <p>Craig S. Keener</p>	<p>“Let them beware, therefore, of the perverting influence of other very varied and strange doctrines which are in circulation (v. 9), particularly the teaching that one cannot become properly established except by partaking of special, sacred or sacrificial food. Such teaching stands completely condemned. It is unspiritual in principle. The good way for the heart to be established is by God’s own working in grace.”<sup>10</sup></p> <p>A.M. Stibbs</p>
<p>“It is often suggested that our author would never call Jewish teachings strange, since they were familiar not only to the author but also to the audience. This view overlooks, however, one important point: <i>xenos</i> refers to foreign religion (or teachings that come from other religions)...Our author might mean</p>	<p>“The author’s reference here to <b>all kinds of strange teachings</b> does not sound at all like a reference to normative Judaism but as if the readers were confronting a particular, sectarian variation of that religion.”<sup>12</sup></p> <p>Zane C. Hodges</p>

<sup>9</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 683.

<sup>10</sup> A.M. Stibbs, “Hebrews,” in D. Guthrie, et. al., *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1216.

<sup>12</sup> Hodges, *BKCNT*, 812.

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<p>teachings that are alien to Christian practice, teachings from another religion—not necessarily ‘unknown’ or peculiar teachings that were obscure or unfamiliar to the audience....Our author is likely dealing with Judaism in general...and is urging the readers not to be diverted or carried away by various Jewish practices....In view of Hebrews 13:9b, food laws in particular seem to be in view.”<sup>11</sup> Ben Witherington III</p>	<p>“The strange teaching which laid such insistence on food was probably some form of syncretistic gnosis, perhaps with Essene or quasi-Essene affinities. This kind of thing was so widespread at the time that the vague allusion to it here (vague to modern readers, not to the original readers, who probably understood the allusion perfectly) provides no clue to the destination of the epistle....[I]t is possible that a reference to sacrificial meals of some kind is included here.”<sup>13</sup> F.F. Bruce</p>
	<p>“Our author has already argued the transitory character of the dietary laws of Judaism (9:10). The argument is similar here. But because the doctrines are described in this verse as <b>strange</b>, it seems unlikely that the dietary restrictions of Judaism are in view in the present context. More probably, here as in verse 4 the writer may be countering teachings derived from the influence of an early Jewish Gnosticism or the general religious syncretism of the time (perhaps involving the partaking of a sacrifice; cf. v. 10).”<sup>14</sup> Donald A. Hagner</p>
	<p>“All that is said specifically is that these teachings have to do with foods, the eating of which is promoted as a vital supplement to the grace by which they are saved. The author flatly denies that any benefit accrues to those who participate in such meals. The issue for the interpreter is the identification of those meals.”<sup>15</sup> Fred B. Craddock</p>

<sup>11</sup> Witherington, *Hebrews-James-Jude*, 360.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce, *Hebrews*, 377.

<sup>14</sup> Hagner, *Hebrews*, 240.

<sup>15</sup> Fred B. Craddock, “The Letter to the Hebrews,” in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 12 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 166.

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As is seen in the chart referencing various Christian opinions of the “foods” of v. 9, it is to be appreciated that there are interpreters who have tried to read this passage very carefully, and consider some of the possible historical background that could sit behind the statements made by the author. Ben Witherington III is a notable exception, whose remarks about strange or foreign teachings are obviously rooted in a supersessionist hermeneutic, where Hebrews’ author apparently pits an old Judaism against a new Christianity. From this vantage point, then, Biblical practices established by God in the Law of Moses or Hebrew Scriptures, can actually be viewed as being “foreign” or “alien” (to the faith?). Lane’s perspective is to be vastly preferred, as he asserts how, “The ‘various strange teachings’ competing for their attention are incompatible with the original, always valid, instruction delivered by the founding fathers of the community (vv 7-8).”<sup>16</sup>

A.M. Stibbs directs the reader in a direction obviously opposite to that of Witherington. He recognizes that those who would have followed the Torah’s dietary code would actually be participating in holiness, and thus the attention of readers needs to be focused on the assertion of v. 10 about eating from the altar, and its implied involvement with those who have benefitted from Yeshua’s sacrifice, versus those who are neglecting it:

“9, 10 raise questions of interpretation on which opinions differ radically. In contrast to the exposition given above some think the reference to eating *foods* has to do with distinctions between clean and clean foods...But in such cases holiness would be promoted by proper abstinence from that which is unclean...here the idea seems rather to be of a misleading suggestion of some spiritual benefit to be gained by eating meat offered in sacrifice. The Christian *altar* is generally recognized to be the cross *i.e.* the sacrifice of Christ. But as the NT teaches that the sacrifice of Christ is something of which Christians spiritually partake (see Jn. 6:53-56; 1 Cor. 5:7, 8; 10:16), many prefer the interpretation that what the priests of the Jewish Tabernacle could not do physically all Christians can do spiritually, *i.e.* partake of their sin-offering.”<sup>17</sup>

Obviously, given the diverse number of views of vs. 9-10, what “those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat” (v. 10) means, will need to be considered in association with the strange teachings Hebrews’ author is warning his audience against. Generally remarking, Donald Guthrie draws out how the author is confronting a mindset where something physical, some sort of food, was believed to either be an appropriate substitute or supplement, to a spiritual deficiency in people:

“It is not clear what is in mind, but the writer seems to imply that some were supposed that all that was needed was dependence on physical rather than spiritual sustenance. The word for *adherents* (*hoi peripatountes* [οἱ περιπατοῦντες], literally those that walk) of the food cult suggests that these people were regarding these foods as part of their way of life...Such wrong walking is here described as unprofitable (*foods...have not benefited*), presumably because the spiritual side of man’s nature has been neglected.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 47b:530-531.

<sup>17</sup> Stibbs, *NBCR*, 1216.

<sup>18</sup> Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 272.

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Fred B. Craddock suggests that what is in view is an improper approach to various ritual meals, with him further suggesting that there was some kind of abuse taking place with memorializing Yeshua's Last Supper:

"It could have been that some members of the congregation with a background in Judaism continued certain ritual meals, finding them at least supplementary efficacious...Another possibility is that the issue over food was due to an interpretation of the Lord's supper that the writer regarded as a contradiction of the grace extended by the sacrifice of Christ."<sup>19</sup>

Ellingworth, taking note of the term *brōma* (βρῶμα) or "food" in v. 9, and its prior usage in 9:10, indicates that some kind of association is intended between such "food" and the Levitical sacrificial service—something which was ultimately powerless to provide for a complete cleansing of the human person:

"[T]he only other occurrence of βρῶμα [*brōma*] in Hebrews (9:10\*) occurs in a negative passage about 'the present age,' the sacrificial system of which has to do 'only with foods and drinks and various washings,' and which, since it belongs to the sphere of σάρξ [*sarx*; flesh], can do nothing for the worshipper's conscience. There must be a strong presupposition that the present verse refers to βρώματα [*brōmata*] in the same sense."<sup>20</sup>

Considering these opinions, is it possible that there was a fringe sector of Judaism influencing some in Hebrews' audience, so that by eating certain things one could gain spiritual favor with God? We do know that Paul warned Timothy about those "who forbid marriage *and* advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth" (1 Timothy 4:3), a false teaching which itself was probably connected to the idea that the general resurrection had already taken place (2 Timothy 2:18). Asceticism, with some kind of eating or not eating in view, was also present in the Colossian false teaching (Colossians 2:16, 21). Likewise, with the destruction of the Temple on the horizon for Hebrews' audience, could there have been those thinking that if they held some specific ceremonial meals, to take the place of animal sacrifices like those offered on the Day of Atonement, that the defilement of sins could be eliminated? Could total abstention from eating meat altogether be in view? Or, is a strange, hyper-sort of purity for keeping kosher intended? There are certainly some possibilities to be considered for v. 9 that due better justice to the author's emphasis on strange and foreign teachings related to food, than just assuming that normative kosher eating is in view.

How have Messianic examiners approached v. 9? "Do not be carried away by various strange teachings; for what is good is for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods. People who have made these the focus of their lives have not benefited thereby" (CJB). There is not that much available, but those who have examined what v. 9 says, have had to weigh, to some degree, what the author of Hebrews might be saying about kosher, and for sure is saying about eating. In David H. Stern's *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, he talks about some of his personal experiences in owning health food stores:

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<sup>19</sup> Craddock, in *NIB*, 12:166.

<sup>20</sup> Ellingworth, 708.

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"This has nothing to do with whether Messianic Jews should keep *kosher*, which is not an issue in this book. Moreover, scholars agree that the early Jewish believers observed *kashrut*...and that the only question which they needed to solve concerned how Jewish believers should behave at the dining table with Gentile believers (Ga 2:11-16, especially Ga 2:12bN).

"There are two possibilities for interpreting 'foods' here. The more likely, based on the way in which v. 10 elaborates on the subject, is that it refers once again to animal sacrifices, this time rather ironically—recall that the animal sacrifices were eaten by those who offered them.

"The other is that some members of this community thought that eating certain foods would enhance their spirituality. As a former owner of health-food stores, I suggest that those who find such a notion improbable should spend an hour or two in a health-food store; they will discover that many people believe that eating in such-and-such a way will bring them to a higher spiritual plane. As with most lies, there is a kernel of truth: just as there are psychosomatic phenomena, wherein the body is affected by thoughts and emotions, so also are there 'somatopsychic' phenonema, in which one's thoughts and emotions, and indirectly one's spiritual condition, are affected by the body. Just as drugs or coffee can affect one's state of mind, so can food. The most radical way to experience this is to note the difference in one's thoughts and emotions after fasting a number of days; a change of diet has comparable effects, though usually in reduced degree. But to grant these commonplace facts any great spiritual importance is to displace priorities; one's spiritual condition of sin is affected **by** God's **grace** appropriated by trusting, **not by foods. People who have made these the focus of their lives have not benefitted thereby.** Rather, faithfulness to God and to Yeshua should be the focus of everyone's life; this provides eternal benefits."<sup>21</sup>

Stern's anecdotes from his past experience, and his interjection of how a person's mental and disposition can be altered via chemical substances or foodstuffs, while useful and accurate—does not really help the reader of Hebrews 13:9-10 to try to get a handle for what the author was confronting among First Century Believers.

Tim Hegg has a more informed view from Second Temple Judaism, thinking that for what is described here, "there is every reason to believe that the conflict was between those who followed the strict halakah of the Pharisaic school and those who remained more relaxed in their view and practice of purities....In fact, an investigation into the Rabbinic sources shows that the halakic issue of whether or not it was right to eat with Gentiles. . .had not yet been settled."<sup>22</sup> He apparently views the statement "for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods," as being separate from "Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings," possibly seeing two imperative remarks made in v. 9. He takes the issue regarding "foods" as associated with Jewish and non-Jewish table fellowship, perhaps in terms of the scene which erupted in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14). An important reference from the Mishnah is offered for consideration:

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<sup>21</sup> Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, pp 721-722.

<sup>22</sup> Hegg, *Hebrews*, 248.

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"[If an Israelite] was eating with [a gentile] at the same time, and he put a flagon [of wine] on the table and a flagon on a side table, and he left it and went out—what is on the table is forbidden. But what is on the side table is permitted" (m.*Avodah Zera* 5:5).<sup>23</sup>

In Hegg's estimation,

"The food laws given in the Torah were, after all, to help set Israel apart from the nations. And for what purpose? *That she might be a light to the nations*. The food laws were never given to seclude her from the non-Jew, yet in the end, in the hands of men who had good but wrongly directed motivations, the rabbinic additions did just that, separating Jew from Gentile, and erecting a wall of separation."<sup>24</sup>

While Hegg's proposal about "foods" in v. 9 is important to be aware of, there is probably a better perspective to be considered in terms of considering the setting of Jewish cultic meals, where Diaspora Jews would commonly eat a meal and memorialize various Temple rituals. This is the perspective represented by Lane, who says, "The form of argumentation in the immediate context (vv 10-16) tends to show that the allusion is to the consumption of foods in some way connected with Jewish sacrificial meals. The reference must be to foods whose consumption was considered essential to strengthening the heart."<sup>25</sup> Concurrent with this, there are some options available to consider false or errant views in association with either the Passover or the Day of Atonement.<sup>26</sup>

**13:10** The author of Hebrews admonishes, "We have an altar from which those serving in the tabernacle have no right to eat" (TLV). The altar (*thusiatērion*, θυσιαστήριον) is best taken to be synonymous with "cross," given the following remarks about Yeshua being taken outside of the city of Jerusalem to be executed (v. 12). The statement that "those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat" can be viewed involving how either (1) the Levitical priests of the First Century, serving a system which cannot provide eternal redemption unlike Yeshua's priesthood, ultimately without recognizing the Messiah cannot participate in partaking of His sacrifice. Or (2) how there were strange teachings circulating regarding food confronted by Hebrews' author, which involved eating of a food/sacrifice associated with a high holiday like *Yom Kippur*. David W. Chapman, from the *ESV Study Bible*, might be more correct than not, in focusing readers,

"This may indicate that some Jewish notions (perhaps in a syncretistic mix) are being combated. Unlike most OT offerings, the tabernacle priests could not eat the sin offering from the Day of Atonement, since it was **burned outside the camp** (Lev. 16:27). However, all Christians partake of the Christian altar (i.e., Jesus' sacrifice)."<sup>27</sup>

As suggested by Lane—the setting of the strange teachings, foods, not being spiritually benefitted by them for a total experience of God's grace (v. 9), and now the interjection of not being able to eat of a sacrifice (v. 10)—could very well be various Jewish cultic meals, which would duplicate rituals in the Temple. He informs us, "it is known from Josephus that special sacrificial meal times were observed by Diaspora Jews

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<sup>23</sup> Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 671.

<sup>24</sup> Hegg, *Hebrews*, 250.

<sup>25</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 47b:532.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 273.

<sup>27</sup> David W. Chapman, "Hebrews," in Wayne Grudem, ed., *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2385.

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as σύνδεσνα [*sundepna*], 'fellowship meals,' in imitation of the fellowship meals of the Temple,"<sup>28</sup> the practice of which among the Roman Jews is detailed in Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* 14. Lane goes on to explain,

"[S]uch meals recalled the thank offering of the Temple. For Jews who lived outside of Jerusalem or the land of Israel, the association of eating with giving of thanks became even more important. Those who had not personally experienced the redemptive character of the grace of God found in the provision of food for the meal an always fresh demonstration of the grace of God....This, then, is the background to the 'strange teachings' that the heart must be strengthened with food, resulting in the power to praise God for the food as well as for the grace experienced in redemption."<sup>29</sup>

There is certainly no shortage of exclamation found in ancient Jewish literature, lauding the praise and fulfillment one was to experience at certain meals. Lane refers to a number of sentiments from the Mishnah and Talmud, including:

"[Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe] Creator of the fruit of the tree" (m.*Berachot* 6:1).<sup>30</sup>

"There is no such thing as celebration without eating and drinking" (b.*Moed Qatan* 9a).<sup>31</sup>

"R. Judah b. Betera says, 'When the house of the sanctuary stood, the sole valid form of rejoicing was eating meat: "And you shall sacrifice peace-offerings and you shall eat there and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God' (Deu. 27: 7). Now that the house of the sanctuary is no longer standing, the sole valid form of rejoicing is drinking wine: 'And wine gladdens the heart of man'" (Psa. 104:15)'" (b.*Pesachim* 109a).<sup>32</sup>

The issue of thanking God for His provision at mealtime, and enjoying food, is obviously not what the author of Hebrews is concerned about. The author of Hebrews would be more concerned about an inappropriate approach to Psalm 104:14-15, a feature of ancient Jewish prayers at mealtime<sup>33</sup>: "He causes vegetation to sprout for the animal, and plants through man's labor, to bring forth bread from the earth; and wine that gladdens man's heart, to make the face glow from oil, and bread that sustains the heart of men" (ATS). As Lane concludes, "The purpose of those who brought the strange teachings concerning the value of ceremonial meals was to stimulate the heart to confession. Their instruction is to be rejected, because eating does not lead to that goal."<sup>34</sup>

While hesitant, Peter T. O'Brien does acknowledge the usefulness of vs. 9-10 being set against the backdrop of Jewish cultic meals:

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<sup>28</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 47b:534.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Tzvee Zahavy and Alan J. Avery-Peck, trans., in Neusner, *Mishnah*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Lane, 47b:534.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 536.

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"Some Jews understood the meals which they ate in their homes to be patterned after the meals eaten in the temple, and at Jewish meals blessings cited Psalm 104:14...Meals played a significant role in Jewish religious and social life and were important for keeping Jews separate from the surrounding Gentile world. Apparently certain foods, and possibly some kinds of ritual meals, were being presented to the readers as helpful for the nourishment of their spiritual lives. If Hebrews is alluding to this practice, then the point is that grace does not come through such Jewish meal customs."<sup>35</sup>

Apparently, some kind of strange teaching, associated with some kind of ritual meal(s), was probably something going on among Hebrews' audience. Such "foods" consumed, possibly representing an animal sacrifice, could have been thought to provide one with true "salvation" or "grace"—but in the process would hardly be some kind of a memorial of Yeshua's sacrifice, would at best provide nothing of importance, and at worst instead subtract from it.

If a well known and widely observed ritual meal like Passover is what is in view, one obviously needs to be careful, as a figure like the Apostle Paul certainly did direct the Corinthians to observe the Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7-8), which would have involved understanding elements like unleavened bread or lamb, and how they typify the Messiah's sacrifice. Eating unleavened bread, however, memorializes the Exodus from Egypt, and is a physical reminder of how born again Believers are to be purged from the presence of sin; eating unleavened bread itself ultimately can do nothing to purge people from sin.<sup>36</sup> Problems can and do ensue, when outward instructions given by God, almost totally eclipse the internal purification of heart and mind that He desires for His children—*something fully available via the work of His Son*.

If eating something in association with *Yom Kippur* or the Day of Atonement is considered, especially as v. 10 does make light of how "We have an altar from which those who serve in the Tent are not permitted to eat" (TLV), **then not eating anything to somehow incur God's grace or favor would be the necessary order of business the audience is directed to do**. If *Yom Kippur* is in view for vs. 9-10, then the author of Hebrews is connecting his audience to his previous assertion that Yeshua the Messiah's death has fulfilled the sacrificial requirements of the Day of Atonement (9:11-12), and to what is asserted further in v. 11: "For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest *as an offering* for sin, are burned outside the camp." The *Yom Kippur* offering was to be totally consumed:

"But the bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp, and they shall burn their hides, their flesh, and their refuse in the fire" (Leviticus 16:27).

The *Yom Kippur* offering was to be totally burned outside the camp of the Israelites, and was not allowed to be eaten at all. This is different from the daily offerings, not sin related, that were frequently eaten as sustenance for the priests (Leviticus 10:16-20). This

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<sup>35</sup> O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 520.

<sup>36</sup> For a further review of Passover, consult the relevant sections of the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

## Hebrews 13:9-10 Eating and Kosher in the Apostolic Scriptures

typology of the of the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice was fulfilled by Yeshua via His sacrifice outside of the city of Jerusalem (vs. 11-12).

Believers in Yeshua “minister at the tabernacle” (NIV) as well, a Heavenly Tabernacle, but not by any kind of priestly service like that of the Levites. Instead, this occurs through worship of Him as Lord and Savior (v. 15).<sup>37</sup> Just as those in ancient times would fast and bow before God in deep reverence at *Yom Kippur*, so should people acknowledging Yeshua’s sacrificial fulfillment of it not eat of something that might skew the sacredness of the event. It is possible that if Jewish proto-Gnostics were involved with some strange teachings negatively influencing Hebrews’ audience, that they introduced things contrary to the spirit of *Yom Kippur*, which is to be upheld as a fast, observed by a figure like the Apostle Paul (Acts 27:9).<sup>38</sup> They might have required that one eat something—perhaps even of their own, obviously unauthorized, “animal sacrifices”<sup>39</sup>—at this time in order to experience a purging of sins and/or receive salvation. When reading the author’s word, “Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them” (v. 9, ESV), one can get the impression of him just shaking his head in antipathy.

Modern readers trying to probe what Hebrews 13:9-10 communicated to Hebrews’ First Century audience will have to make a value judgment in recognizing that strange teachings associated with food are what are in view, and decide whether or not kosher eating was regarded as something normative. When the false teachings being associated with some sort of ritual foods and cultic meals are weighed in, then a number of additional possibilities, proposals, and thoughts sit before us.

Ultimately, what people eat cannot provide them with the grace that is only available in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ). Various Torah practices can teach people about God’s holiness and His intentions and character—but they cannot cleanse human hearts of sin. **This is something that only the Holy Spirit can do in transforming hearts and minds with His grace.** Noting the presence of Psalm 104:14-15 for the author’s thought, David L. Allen is proper to direct, “Every Jewish meal was begun with this very blessing. Our author is at pains to argue that God’s grace is not mediated through meal regulations, whether normal everyday household meals or the ritual meals of the temple. Rather, the heart is strengthened by the grace of God extended through Christ.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name” (Hebrews 13:15).

<sup>38</sup> It is widely and correctly recognized among modern examiners that the Apostle Paul was not the author of Hebrews. It is probable, though, that the author of Hebrews was a close associate of Paul’s, with figures such as Barnabas or Apollos commonly proposed.

Consult the entry for the Epistle to the Hebrews in *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>39</sup> This is where some of us may need to be reminded of the *kaparos* ceremony observed by various Orthodox Jews today at *Yom Kippur*, when the death of a chicken is believed to be an appropriate substitute for one’s sins. This custom is widely condemned, or at least frowned upon, by many modern Jewish authorities. If something of this sort were at all practiced in Second Temple times, it would have been similarly classified as fringe.

Consult “A Summarization of Yom Kippur Traditions,” appearing in the *Messianic Fall Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

<sup>40</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 615.

## Messianic Kosher Helper

All can be agreed that for Hebrews 13:9-10, the main issue regarding “foods” countered by the author, was that various people were attaching some unwarranted significance to something they consumed—going well beyond the themes of a thanksgiving memorial—forgetting the main emphasis of the gospel. **The grace of God is to transform men and women from within, not by an external substance ingested from without.** Too many in Hebrews’ audience were not demonstrating the spiritual maturity that they should have been (5:12-6:2). They should have had a proper handle, as largely Jewish Believers, on how to obey God and demonstrate God’s love to the world.