

The Branch to the Nose

Understanding One of the Most Misunderstood Expressions in Scripture

by

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Among students of Scripture there are passages that have become controversial, not because the text itself is obscure, but because later readers have divorced the words from their historical setting. When a passage is removed from its literary, historical, and cultural context, it becomes easy to build doctrines that the biblical authors never intended.

One such example is the expression found in **Yekhezqel (Ezekiel) 8:17**:

"...and, lo, they put the branch to their nose."

Over the years this phrase has been interpreted by some as a reference to smoking cannabis, while others have more recently attempted to associate it with snorting narcotics through a hollow reed or "branch." These interpretations have gained popularity in certain circles despite lacking any historical, grammatical, or archaeological support. The expression has nothing to do with recreational drug use. Rather, it belongs to a much older world of ritual symbolism and idolatrous worship.

Before examining the phrase itself, we must first consider its context.

Ezekiel is shown a series of abominations being committed within the Temple. These are not isolated acts but a progressive unveiling of Judah's spiritual corruption. The prophet first witnesses images of idolatry within the sanctuary (Ezekiel 8:5–6). He is then shown the elders secretly offering incense before engraved images (vv. 7–13). Next, women are observed mourning for **Tammuz** (v. 14), a Mesopotamian deity associated with seasonal fertility. Finally, twenty-five men stand in the Temple precincts with their backs toward the Temple of YHWH while worshiping the rising sun (vv. 15–16).

Only after presenting these acts does YHWH declare:

"...they have returned to provoke me to anger: and, lo, they put the branch to their nose." (Ezekiel 8:17)

The phrase therefore appears within a larger indictment of syncretism—the blending of the worship of YHWH with the religious customs of surrounding nations.

The Historical Background

Ancient Near Eastern texts preserve evidence of ritual gestures involving vegetation held before the face during acts of worship.

One Akkadian expression, **laban appi**, describes a gesture of humility or supplication performed before a deity. Artistic depictions frequently portray worshipers with one hand covering the nose and mouth while holding a small cylindrical object. Some scholars associate this object with a freshly cut branch.

Evidence from the Sumerian composition **Gilgamesh in the Land of the Living** likewise suggests the ritual use of branches cut from

living trees. Similar customs later appear among Mesopotamian peoples in connection with fertility rites and solar worship. Participants held bundles of palm branches or grape vines before their faces as part of ceremonial acts intended to obtain divine favor or forgiveness.

Whether every detail of these customs corresponds precisely with Ezekiel's description remains a matter of historical investigation. What is clear is that ritual branches formed part of the religious vocabulary of the ancient Near East, making this background far more plausible than modern interpretations involving smoking weed or snorting cocaine.

The Grammar of the Passage

The Hebrew text reads:

וְהֵנָּם שֹׁלְחִים אֶת־הַזְּמוּרָה אֶל־אַפָּם
(*vehinnām sholehîm et-hazzěmôrāh el-appām*)

Literally:

"And behold, they are putting (or extending) the branch to their nose."

The noun זְמוּרָה (*zemôrāh*) ordinarily refers to a branch, shoot, vine, or pruning branch, especially one associated with the vine. Nothing in the word itself suggests a smoking apparatus.

Likewise, the expression אֶל־אַפָּם (*el appām*), "to their nose," describes the direction of the action but offers no indication that smoke was being inhaled. The verse simply depicts a ritual gesture involving a branch brought before the face.

When interpreted within its literary setting, the phrase functions as another example of Judah's participation in foreign religious practices.

False Repentance and Religious Performance

One of the striking features of Ezekiel 8 is that the people were not abandoning religion altogether. Rather, they were attempting to combine the worship of YHWH with the religious customs of neighboring cultures.

The gesture of bringing the branch before the nose appears to have been one outward act among many intended to express humility before a deity. Yet the very context reveals that such gestures were empty. The people continued in violence, idolatry, and covenant unfaithfulness while maintaining the appearance of religious devotion.

Their problem was not merely improper ritual.

It was an unrepentant heart.

This explains why YHWH immediately follows the description with judgment rather than commendation.

The Hebraic Lesson

Throughout Scripture, YHWH consistently rejects external religious performance when it is divorced from covenant faithfulness.

The prophets repeatedly remind Israel that obedience is greater than ritual, righteousness greater than ceremony, and repentance greater than religious symbolism. The lesson of Ezekiel 8 is therefore not about branches. It is about hypocrisy. A branch held before the face cannot conceal a rebellious heart.

Wisdom from the Scriptures

"To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith YHWH..." (Isaiah 1:11)

"Rend your heart, and not your garments..." (Joel 2:13)

"To obey is better than sacrifice..." (1 Samuel 15:22)

"The sacrifice of Elohim is a broken spirit..." (Psalm 51:17)

The prophets continually call us beyond outward displays of religion and into lives marked by sincerity, obedience, and covenant faithfulness. It is easy to become fascinated with obscure phrases or unusual customs, but the greater message of Ezekiel 8 is not hidden in the branch—it is revealed in the condition of the heart.

YHWH has never desired empty gestures in place of genuine repentance. Every generation must guard against substituting religious performance for faithful obedience, remembering that true worship begins not with the hands, but with the heart.