

## THE INCENSE OFFERING IN ITS BIBLICAL CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

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### *Introduction*

We will investigate in a preliminary way the incense offering as that was required by God in the tabernacle and the temple. We will therefore not deal with the frankincense (לִבְנָה) that accompanied the cereal offering (Lev. 2:1-2, 15-16).

In approaching this subject, we will first deal with the relevant terminology; secondly, look at the appropriate legislation, including the meaning of this sacrifice; next consider the wider Old Testament context; and finally consider some further New Testament perspectives.

### *Terminology*

The Hebrew term קִטְוֶה is the Hebrew word that usually lies behind the English "incense," while לִבְנָה is normally translated by "frankincense." קִטְוֶה comes from the root קָטַר. The corresponding verb is used especially in Piel and Hiphil. The basic meaning of the root seems to be "to let an offering ascend in odor or smoke."<sup>2</sup>

The context indicates that קִטְוֶה means incense or the incense offering in the Pentateuch, Ezekiel, and Chronicles. This is also the case in at least two of the five uses of קִטְוֶה elsewhere (namely, Prov. 27:9 and Ps. 141:2). In Psalm 66:15, the term refers to the smoke of rams; but the AV translates "incense." In Isaiah 1:13, קִטְוֶה may refer

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<sup>1</sup>This is a somewhat abbreviated text of a lecture delivered at Mid-America Reformed Seminary on November 9, 1989. Due to factors largely outside my control, the publishing of this lecture has been a long time coming. To prevent further delay, footnotes have been kept to a minimum.

<sup>2</sup>L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, editors, *Hebraisches und Aramaisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* (USA: E.J. Brill, 1967-1990), 1022-1024 (hereafter HALAT); also K. Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, VT Sup 38 (USA: E.J. Brill, 1986), 52.

to the smoke of the offerings or to the offerings themselves (cf. the parallelism); but the NIV renders it as "incense." The point is that there appears to be a certain amount of fluidity of meaning in the term קִטְרֶת. It can refer to the incense, the incense offering, or the smoke of the sacrificial animal.<sup>3</sup>

The verb קָטַר is found in Piel and Hiphil. In Piel it is not always easy to determine whether it means "to send an offering or sacrifice up in smoke" or "to offer incense." In the Hiphil it also has both meanings, but it more often definitely has the meaning "to offer incense." However, each case has to be studied according to its own merit. Again there is a certain fluidity.<sup>4</sup>

### *Legislation and Meaning*

#### *The incense*

We first read of incense in Exodus 25:6 (cf. 35:8, 28) where the LORD God asked for a freewill offering from the people for the tabernacle construction and everything that belonged to it. And this included "spices. . .for the fragrant incense."<sup>5</sup> All this was in preparation for the incense that was to be made according to the instructions found in Exodus 30. The fact that such a freewill offering could be asked shows that such spices were readily available. (Israel may have taken these spices with them out of Egypt, or they could also have purchased them in the wilderness from caravans that they may have met.)

In Exodus 30:34-38, we read something of the composition of the incense that God wants for his service.

The LORD said to Moses, "Take sweet spices [סַמִּים]—stacte [גַּשְׁמֵן], onycha [שְׁחָלִית], and galbanum [תְּלַבְנָת]—sweet spices [סַמִּים] with pure frankincense [קִטְרֶת זָכָה] (of each shall there be an equal part), and make an incense [קִטְרֶת] blended as by the perfumer seasoned with salt, pure and holy; and you shall beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimo-

<sup>3</sup>See further Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, 53-54. Also cf. קָטַר, incense (Jer 44:21) and קָטַר, incense (Mal. 1:11).

<sup>4</sup>See further Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, 54-59.

<sup>5</sup>לְקִטְרֶת הַסַּמִּים . . . בְּעֵמִים (Ex. 25:6).

ny in the Tent of Meeting where I shall meet with you. It shall be for you most holy. And the incense which you shall make according to its composition you shall not make for yourselves. It shall be for you, holy to the LORD. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.

With respect to the ingredients listed in verse 34, **סמיים** does not indicate a specific substance, but probably refers to aromatics in general.<sup>6</sup> (The stacte, onycha, and galbanum are thus in apposition to **סמיים**.) **נָטַף** (< **נָטַף**, to drip) is often identified as stacte, a resinous aromatic gum exuding from some species of a balsam tree (*Commiphora opobalsamum*). Some include the storax tree (*styrax officinalis*).<sup>7</sup> **שְׁחֵלֶת** occurs only in Exodus 30:34 and has been translated in the Septuagint with "onux," "claw" or "nail," from which the rendering onycha comes. That which looks like a claw or nail has been identified with certain molluscs (of the *Strombus* family) which live in warm, shallow water of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. When burnt, they give off an aromatic but pungent smoke and "they intensify and prolong the fragrance of the spices with which they are mixed."<sup>8</sup> **חֶלְבָנָה** (< **חֶלֶב**, to give milk) is rendered "galbanum" which is actually a Semitic loan word which has come to us via the Greek and Latin translations of **חֶלְבָנָה**. There is general agreement that this refers to a milky, perhaps white substance, the resin of various species of *Ferula* which is a member of the carrot family. When burnt, it gives a very pleasant odor. It is native to Persia.<sup>9</sup> The final ingredient mentioned is frankincense (**לְבָנָה**). Frankincense is native to South Arabia and is collected from the bark of various species of genus *Boswellia*. The best frankincense

<sup>6</sup>The term may be related to Arabic *šmn*. So Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, 67; cf. HALAT, 716b; F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing Co., 1962), 702a (hereafter BDB).

<sup>7</sup>HALAT, 656b; BDB, 643a; *Fauna and Flora in the Bible* (Helps for Translators, 11; London: American Bible Society, 1972), 178; R.K. Harrison, *Healing Herbs of the Bible* (1966), 49; Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, 65.

<sup>8</sup>W. H. Gispen, *Exodus* (Bible Student's Commentary; 1982, orig. published in Dutch 1939), (St. Catharines, ON: Paideia, 1982), 287. NEB renders it "aromatic shell." Cf. Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, 65-66; Harrison, *Healing Herbs of the Bible*, 47-48.

<sup>9</sup>Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, 66: "When ripe the young stem yields a milky juice. . . the resinous gum soon solidifies and changes to an amber colour." *Fauna and Flora in the Bible*, 123. Also see Harrison, *Healing Herbs of the Bible*, 20.

is white and not surprisingly the Hebrew term is based on the root לבן, meaning "to be white."<sup>10</sup>

Equal parts of these spices were to be mixed to produce the holy incense. An unspecified amount of salt also had to be added (Ex. 30:35). It may be that the salt functioned to make the mixture burn and smoke more readily.<sup>11</sup> However, every sacrifice had to have salt (the salt of the covenant) included (Lev. 2:13; Ezek. 43:24). We can also think here of how Christians, who are to present themselves as holy sacrifices to God (Rom. 12:1), also have to be salted (Mark 9:49).<sup>12</sup>

In Exodus 30:36, we read that some of this incense was to be placed in the Tent of Meeting before the testimony. What is meant by that is not completely clear. According to Gispen "This verse may indicate that Moses was to place this powder inside the Holy Place, so that there was always a supply ready for use, but this is not certain."<sup>13</sup> Placing the incense before the testimony probably refers to burning a portion on the incense altar before the ark.<sup>14</sup>

#### *The altar of incense*

Exodus 30 gives instructions for making "an altar to burn incense upon [קִטְרוֹת מִזְבֵּחַ מִקְטֹרֶת]" (RSV; literally "an altar of burning of incense"). We read in Exodus 30:1-6 (RSV):

You shall make an altar to burn incense upon; of acacia wood shall you make it. A cubit shall be its length, and a cubit its breadth; it shall be square, and two cubits shall be its height; its horns shall be of one piece with it. And you shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and its sides round about and its horns; and you shall make for it a moulding of gold round about. And two golden rings shall you make for it; under its moulding on two opposite sides of it shall you make them, and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. And you shall put it before the veil that is by the ark of the testimony,

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<sup>10</sup>Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, 60; Harrison, *Healing Herbs of the Bible*, 43.

<sup>11</sup>Gispen, *Exodus*, 287.

<sup>12</sup>See further on this point, W.L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 349.

<sup>13</sup>Gispen, *Exodus*, 288.

<sup>14</sup>So R.A. Cole, *Exodus* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 209.

before the mercy seat that is over the testimony, where I will meet with you.

Several points should be underlined. First of all, the incense altar is small. Secondly, similar horned incense altars have been found in pagan sites in Palestine.<sup>15</sup> The LORD also reckons with the cultural context of his people in specifying his requirements for the incense altar. Thirdly, this altar is portable. Fourthly, this altar was very precious. It was of gold and also called "the golden altar" (lit. "altar of gold," Num. 4:11). The preciousness of this altar is also shown by the fact that it was close to the ark, which was in the Holy of Holies. Thus it was close to the place where God meets his people (Ex. 25:22; cf. 29:42) and is therefore described in Leviticus 16:18 as the altar "before the LORD," indicating in this way its close association with the mercy seat.

This close relationship with the ark is of utmost importance and hence the fact that it is on the other side of the curtain is sometimes omitted. For example, in Exodus 40:5 we simply read, "You shall put the golden altar for incense before the ark of the testimony." There is no reference to a curtain. Not until verse 26 of Exodus 40 is the veil mentioned. The point is that the relationship of the incense altar to the ark is more important to mention for the context of Exodus 40:5 than the fact of a separating curtain. In this light, we can understand why 1 Kings 6:22 associates the incense altar so closely with the ark, that it says that it belongs to the inner sanctuary (לִדְבִיר). This description is not a contradiction to the altar's standing outside the Holy of Holies, but only stresses the close association.

It is within this context of a very close association of the incense altar to the ark that we have to appreciate Hebrews 9:3,4 which states that "behind the second curtain stood a Tent called the Holy of Holies having [ἔχουσα] the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant." This does not mean that the author of Hebrews did not know the place of this altar. But considering his theological concern with atonement and forgiveness and the entrance into God's presence, it is not surprising that the ark and the incense altar are brought here into a very close association, as was already done in the Old Testament. Furthermore, the term ἔχουσα, "having," does not need to mean that

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<sup>15</sup>See, e.g., K. Galling, "Incense Altar," in G.A. Buttrick, editor, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), II:699 (hereafter *IDB*).

the altar stood *in* the Holy of Holies. The preposition "in" is not used. There is only that very close relationship expressed in the "having" of the altar.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Revelation 8:3 speaks of the golden altar of incense as being "before the throne" [ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου]. Here too the close relationship is underlined without mentioning the veil.

This close relationship and proximity of the altar of incense to the Holy of Holies is very important. The incense smoke had to penetrate into the Holy of Holies, through the veil, to God's presence.

This takes us to Exodus 30:7-10, where we read of the burning of the incense.

And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening, he shall burn it, a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations. You shall offer no unholy incense thereon, nor burnt offering, nor cereal offering; and you shall pour no libation thereon. Aaron shall make atonement upon its horns once a year; with the blood of the sin offering of atonement he shall make atonement for it once in the year throughout your generations; it is most holy to the LORD.

It can thus be noted that twice a day the smoke of incense had to be sent up before the throne of God. An obvious consequence was that the smell of incense would never be absent from the tabernacle. It can also be noted that once a year atonement for the altar had to be made. Before we discuss the significance of the incense offering, let us consider other legislation pertaining to incense as it relates to the Day of Atonement.

#### *Behind the veil*

Whereas the altar of incense stood outside the Holy of Holies, on the Day of Atonement the incense had to be brought inside the Holy of Holies. We read in Leviticus 16:11-14:

Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house; he shall kill

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<sup>16</sup>See further, e.g., P.E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 312-314.

the bull as a sin offering for himself. And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small; and he shall bring it within the veil and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat which is upon the testimony, lest he die; and he shall take some of the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times.

Notice the superlatives in verse 12: "a censer full of coals of fire" and "two handfuls of sweet incense." As much fiery coal as possible and as much incense as possible. The burning coals come "from the altar before the LORD," that is, the whole burnt altar outside in the court. There was always fire on that altar (Lev. 9:2 [Eng., 9]; cf. Num. 17:11 [Eng., 16:46]), so the coals could readily be retrieved.

In verses 12-13, notice that only after entering the Holy of Holies was the incense to be burned. The purpose was to cover the mercy-seat with the smoke lest the high priest die. No one can see God and live (cf. Judg. 6:22-24; 13:22; Is. 6:5). So the incense was brought directly into the very presence of God. Usually the smoke of the incense came to the Holy of Holies by going through the veil, but on the annual Day of Atonement it was brought right into the presence of God by the high priest.

### *The significance of the incense*

What was the significance of the incense? Why was that altar there before the veil? Why the taking of the incense into the Holy of Holies once a year? What was the point?

In antiquity, incense was used to produce a pleasing scent. That is fundamental to the rationale for incense. The concern for a pleasing fragrance is understandable when one considers that Israel and her neighbors lived in warm climates where odors from perspiration and putrefaction developed very quickly. Incense helped to do away with unpleasant odors. Therefore, incense also had the element of joy. Think of Proverbs 27:9, "Oil and incense make the heart glad."

That the scent or the sweet smell was also important to Israel's incense sacrifice as demanded by the LORD seems obvious. The meticulous directions for making the holy incense support this idea as well as the injunction that no one was to use this holy mixture for themselves. It was holy to the LORD (Ex. 30:37). Also the fact that the

incense altar had to be close to the ark supports the idea that the scent was important. The LORD had to smell this sacrifice. Twice a day it was therefore sacrificed. It requires little imagination to observe that the scent of incense in the tabernacle and later the temple must have been overwhelming. So God wanted it. (Cf. Is. 6:4 where Isaiah receives a vision in the temple: ". . .and the house was filled with smoke." This was probably the smoke of the incense offering.)

What does all this mean or imply? Surely, God is not man that he only needs and desires a perfumed house. What is behind this? Let us go a little further afield.

It is well-known that the aspect of scent or aroma plays an important role with the other sacrifices as well. In Genesis 8:21, we read that the LORD smells the "pleasing odor (רִיחַ תְּגִיחָה)" of Noah's sacrifices. The phrase "pleasing odor" occurs quite frequently in Leviticus and in Numbers. For example, it is used of the burnt offering of cattle (Lev. 1:9), of smaller animals (Lev. 1:13), and even of birds (Lev. 1:17). With each offering we read "an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to Yahweh." Similarly with the cereal offering (Lev. 2:2, 9, 12), the peace offering (Lev. 3:5), and the sin offering (Lev. 4:31).

What does this recurring phrase, "pleasing odor (רִיחַ תְּגִיחָה)" mean? Let us go back to Leviticus 1. The verb used for sacrifice is קָטַר in Hiphil. The emphasis is thus on the fact that the sacrifice goes up in smoke and has an odor. קָטַר does not convey the idea of simply burning the animals. In that case, the verb שָׂרַף would have been a more appropriate term to use. Here the stress is on the fact that sacrifice had to produce smoke and an odor or scent. This emphasis is also found with the cereal offering (Lev. 2:2, 9), the peace offering (Lev. 3:5), and the sin offering (Lev. 4:31). In all cases, קָטַר in the Hiphil and the phrase "pleasing odor (רִיחַ תְּגִיחָה)" are used. Therefore, these features indicate something basic to sacrifice (as already seen in the case of Noah).

Literally רִיחַ תְּגִיחָה means a smell or a scent of rest (or pleasantness). This is a smell that brings to rest. In other words, this expression רִיחַ תְּגִיחָה does not indicate that the smoke as such was pleasant. That kind of idea you find, for example, in the Gilgamesh Epic. After sacrifice had been offered,

The gods smelled the savor,  
The gods smelled the sweet savor.



The gods gathered like flies over the sacrificer.<sup>17</sup>

When the LORD smells the sacrifice of Noah, or of his people Israel, then it is not the outward smell as such in which he rejoices. No, he is brought to inner rest by the disposition and attitude shown by the bringing of sacrifice.

What is sacrifice? Sacrifice is first of all a gift to God by which someone acknowledges his dependence on the LORD and wants to give of himself to God, giving his best.<sup>18</sup> This disposition was a sweet smelling savor to God. It gave him rest and joy. Therefore, on receiving Noah's sacrifice, he said, "I will never again curse the ground, . . .neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). Secondly, when the LORD took the practice of sacrificing officially in his service, he established it as part of his service of reconciliation. Sacrifice spoke of atonement.<sup>19</sup> Blood is a key element (Lev. 17:11). Sacrifice as established by God points to his great gift of love in Christ. Thus the basic characteristic of sacrifice as we first meet it in Scripture (as a gift) is maintained, only now it speaks of God's great gift in Christ.

Both of these elements, the element of giving a gift and the element of atonement, are found in the incense offering. If we consider both of these carefully, it will help us to appreciate why the incense sacrifice presented such a pleasing odor to the LORD and brought the LORD to inner rest and peace. Let us begin with the second, the atonement element.

The incense offering fits in and is based on the atonement emphasis of the entire sacrificial service. This can be seen in a number of ways. First of all, the altar of incense was not unlike the altar of the whole burnt offering. Both altars had a square shape. Both altars had horns of one piece with them. Both of them were overlaid by metal; the one by bronze, the other by gold. Both were designed to be carried, although the proportions were different (cf. Ex. 30:1-5 with 27:1-8). It may be stating too much to say that the incense "altar was a replica in

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<sup>17</sup>Gilgamesh Epic XI:159-161 as translated by A. Heidel in his *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 87.

<sup>18</sup>See further my "The Burnt Offering in the Biblical Context," *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Orange City, IA: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991), 195-206.

<sup>19</sup>See further my "The Origin and Character of Sacrifice in Scripture," *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, 1991, Vol. 7, No. 1, 3-16.

miniature of the altar of burnt offering,<sup>20</sup> but there is a clear unity and a belonging together, also in the style.

In the second place, the incense altar and whole burnt altar both had to have sacrifices and burning with smoke at the same time (with both sacrifices קִטֹּרֶת is used), namely in the morning and evening (Ex. 29:39; 30:7,8; Num. 28:2,8). Both sacrifices are therefore continual offerings (Ex. 29:38; 30:8).

Thirdly, the fire for the incense sacrifice was taken from the whole burnt altar which had to burn continually (Lev. 6:13; 10:1; cf. 16:12; Num. 17:11 [Eng., 16:46]).

Fourthly, there was another direct connection between the whole burnt offering in the courtyard and the incense offering in the Holy Place because on the Day of Atonement the high priest took the blood from the whole burnt offering and applied it to that large altar (Lev. 16:18-19) and also to the golden incense altar inside (Ex. 30:10). Furthermore, that blood was also sprinkled before the mercy seat by the high priest who had also taken the incense with him (Lev. 16:12-14).

All these atonement connotations of the incense offering spoke of the covenant peace that God was establishing with his people. The smell of the incense therefore spoke of that peace and gave rest to the LORD. It was a pleasing odor, that is, literally an odor bringing rest. This element is in the foreground in Leviticus 16 when on the great Day of Atonement incense had to be burnt in the Holy of Holies. We can also think here of Ephesians 5:2, "Christ gave Himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." He is the fulfillment also of this sacrifice.

There is also the other element with sacrifice, made possible because of the atonement, namely, the idea of gift. With sacrifice man gives of himself and gives his best to God. This comes out especially in the precious incense. When one stops to think what all this entails, this giving to the LORD of your best, then one can understand that Scripture indicates that incense speaks of prayer. In Psalm 141:2 we read:

Let my prayer be counted (as) incense before Thee,  
and the lifting up of my hands (as) an evening sacrifice.

As is common in Hebrew poetry, there is parallelism here. Prayer is parallel to the lifting up of the hands (which is a prayer posture), and the incense is parallel to the evening sacrifice. This refers to the

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<sup>20</sup>H.F. Beck, "Incense," *IDB*, II:698.

incense offering offered at the time of the evening and morning sacrifices (Ex. 29:38-39; 30:7-8). So prayer and incense offering are related and actually identified (Heb. has אֲשֶׁר, "as"). One can also think of Revelation 5:8 where the twenty-four elders have "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." Incense offering therefore pictures prayer. It is not surprising that the custom developed that when the incense sacrifice was offered, people outside the temple would be praying. Ezra's prayer for mercy seems to have been intentionally held at the evening sacrifice (Ezra 9:5). We read in Luke 1:10 that "the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense." One can also think of Judith's prayer offered at the time of the evening incense offering (Judith 9:1). Furthermore, we read in Acts 3:1, that "Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour." This is the hour of the evening sacrifice and therefore, also the incense sacrifice.<sup>21</sup>

What a beautiful picture of prayer incense is. For is prayer not the sacrifice of our lips, a sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15) in gratitude to God? In Psalm 50 we read, "he who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors Me" (v. 23, cf. v. 14; cf. Is. 60:6). Is prayer also not the sacrifice of the broken-hearted in sorrow for sin (Ps. 51:19 [Eng., 17])? Is prayer not the giving of ourselves to God in gratitude as we seek communion with the living God (Ps. 42:6-9 [Eng., 5-8]) in thankfulness for his redemption and recognizing God's pre-eminent place and our dependence?

Indeed, such incense, such prayer is to be unceasing as it was in days of old when incense offerings were to give a continual fragrance before God's throne. In this context we can understand 1 Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray without ceasing." God still wants that constant incense fragrance, now evident in our prayer. Such prayer as the chief part of thankfulness makes God experience the aroma of the covenant blessing of fellowship on the basis of the Atonement provided in Christ. God rejoices in prayer, in the life seeking communion with him in gratitude for blessing and in sorrow for sin. That is the aroma giving rest, (רִיחַ תְּהִיָּה), the covenant rest on the basis of the sacrifice on Golgotha.

Small wonder then that the incense offering was so important and was placed so close to the very throne of God. It pulled so much together and it spoke of so much. Here something of the deep meaning

<sup>21</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, XIV.65 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974).

of sacrifice with all its implications comes to a head. For that reason, incense is mentioned in the blessing of Levi as an important element of the priesthood. "They shall put incense before Thee" (Deut. 33:10). In 1 Samuel 2:28 the priesthood is characterized in part by the burning of incense.

Having considered the legislation and the meaning of the incense sacrifice, let us now consider the uses of the incense offering as related in the Old Testament, which illustrate some of the above ideas.

### *The Wider Old Testament Context*

In the first place, after the tabernacle had been erected and it, along with its contents and the altar with the utensils, had been anointed and sanctified, the leaders of Israel, the leaders of their father's houses, the leaders of the tribes, brought offerings and dedicatory gifts to the LORD. Among the gifts they brought were incense (קִטְוֶה) for the incense offering (Num. 7 passim). Israel understood! The incense that came into the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place spoke of the sweet savour of the covenant peace because of the atonement made possible in God's righteousness—a covenant peace that included them—a sweet savour that also represented their prayers for the covenant communion with God.

Here is a second illustration of the use of incense. The high premium that the LORD placed on obedience in the matter of incense is shown in God's punishing Nadab and Abihu for their sin respecting the incense offering. The context is remarkable. In Leviticus 9:22-24 a high point in God's relationship to Israel is recorded. The priests have been consecrated, sacrifices have been offered and Aaron had blessed the people. The glory of the LORD appeared to the people and fire from God consumed the burnt offering. Then we read in Leviticus 10:1-3:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the LORD, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came forth from the presence of the LORD and devoured them and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD has said, 'I will show Myself holy among those who are near me and before all the people I will be glorified.'"

It is not feasible now to enter into all the possible reasons for the severity of this punishment, but suffice it to say that Nadab and Abihu,

who had been so highly privileged (they had seen God! Ex. 24:10), here serve the LORD in their own way. It is not impossible that under the influence of alcohol (cf. Lev. 10:8-11) they had tried to add their own "number" to this festive day by bringing incense by unauthorized fire into the Holy of Holies. After the judgment of God upon these men, we are told that,

The LORD spoke to Moses, after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died; the LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at all times into the Holy Place within the veil, before the mercy-seat which is upon the ark, lest he die" (Lev. 16:1-2).

Thus Aaron was explicitly prohibited from entering the Holy of Holies whenever he wanted to. All factors considered, one gets the impression that Nadab and Abihu walked right into the Holy of Holies in an unauthorized way and with strange fire. The LORD punished them with death. God had not commanded this incense offering (cf. Lev. 10:1; Is. 1:13) and therefore he had very little patience with it. So they died before the LORD, that is, probably in or just before the tabernacle. At this crucial juncture when worship according to the Law given at Sinai was started, this sin was punished with death. God is holy.

Another punishment that comes to mind due to wrong or illegitimate administration of the incense offering is the leprosy of King Uzziah. King Uzziah walked straight into the temple, wanting to bring an incense offering. When he would not listen to the protestations of the high priest, Azariah, as well as eighty priests, the LORD struck him with leprosy (2 Chr. 26:16-21). He tried to do as a king what was the prerogative of the priest and the LORD had no patience.

In the third place, there is the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and the subsequent punishment, which tells us something about the place of incense. The rebels under Korah were Levites and they desired the prerogative of the priesthood, such as being able to burn incense before the LORD. This was a very important prerogative of the priesthood, for it brought you before the LORD. Numbers 16:1-7 informs us,

Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men; and they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-

known men; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them; why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" When Moses heard it, he fell on his face; and he said to Korah and all his company, "In the morning the LORD will show who is his, and who is holy, and will cause him to come near to him; him whom he will choose he will cause to come near to him. Do this: take censers, Korah and all his company; put fire in them and put incense upon them before the LORD tomorrow, and the man whom the LORD chooses shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!"

These instructions must have made the rebels think. Remember Nadab and Abihu who had gone beyond their office in offering incense in a manner of their own choosing. Now these rebels are to be tested precisely with respect to the incense offering! Would the LORD smell a sweet savour? That precisely this offering is chosen is very significant. It is holy and therefore, Moses says "You have gone too far, sons of Levi [not of Aaron]!" The instructions are essentially repeated in Numbers 16:16-19 where we read that Korah's company of two hundred fifty were to be present with their censers along with Aaron with his. When the moment came, the LORD clearly chose for Aaron. "Fire came forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred fifty men offering incense" (Num. 16:35). God reaffirmed his election of Aaron as high priest. Because the censers had been used for the LORD even in this test, they were holy to him, and therefore, the LORD claimed them. As we read in Numbers 17:1-5 (Eng., 16:37-40), the censers were hammered into plates as a covering for the altar and so were sacred to the LORD.

The next day, Israel murmured again against Moses and Aaron. The rebellion was far from over. Then God came in judgment, determining to consume the people (Num. 17:7-10 [Eng., 16:42-45]). One could say there was only the stench of sin and iniquity hurting the holy nostrils of God. God was ready to make an end to the whole stinking business. What could Moses and Aaron do? The LORD had told them to distance themselves from the congregation. Apparently, Moses and Aaron could not do what they had done earlier, namely, pray for the people (Num. 16:22). So they do the next best. Moses orders Aaron to get the incense and to burn it, to use the symbol of prayer. The sweet smelling savour that spoke of Israel's giving her best, her desire

for communion with God, must be produced. The savour that spoke of a communion based on the atonement provided by God in his sacrifice also in this incense must be evident. God must remember the communion (and the atonement) he established. So a proper incense offering was prepared. Fire was taken from the altar, and incense is added. Since the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle, Aaron could not enter there. Thus we read that,

Aaron ran into the midst of the assembly; and behold, the plague had already begun among the people; and he put on the incense, and made atonement for the people and he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stopped. (Num. 17:12-13 [Eng., 16:47-48])

What a moving scene. There was the high priest of Israel standing in the midst of a dying people interceding with incense, the incense offering that spoke of atonement and that also spoke of prayer. The two aspects came together here. And the LORD responded by stopping the plague. For in the midst of the foul stench of rebellion and sin, the LORD smelled the savour that brought rest to him (רִיחַ תְּנִיחָה), the covenant peace on the basis of the atonement.

#### *Further New Testament Perspectives*

In a sense, Aaron's burning the incense in the midst of a dying people says it all. Aaron points to our great High Priest, Jesus Christ. How Israel must have sensed the shortcomings of their priesthood. Think, for instance, of Nadab and Abihu. Everything the Aaronic priesthood did was affected by sin. The great High Priest Jesus Christ was needed. He would offer THE sacrifice for all sins and so be THE aroma, THE savour that brings true covenant peace and rest. Christ, who "gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering, and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:2; cf. 2 Cor. 2:15; Phil. 4:18). On the basis of his sacrifice our prayers too can be a pleasing odor, an incense offering acceptable to God, bringing peace and rest to him as he rejoices in his work of salvation (as evidenced in our prayer). He sanctifies also our prayers as they ascend to the throne of grace and are accompanied by his intercessory work and prayer.

The beautiful vision of Revelation 8:1-5 makes that clear. We cannot now enter into detail with respect to this rich vision. What I want to point out concerns the incense offering. After the seventh seal was opened, John saw that

another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with all the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God (Rev. 8:3-4).

Notice that the angel was *given* much incense to mingle with the prayers of the saints so that the prayers of the saints can rise up to God. This was not the angel's own incense. May we then not assume that this heavenly incense was the incense of Christ's intercessory work? Does he not enable the incense and the prayers of the saints to rise to God? Of themselves the prayers of the saints lack so much and therefore so much incense from Another is necessary to make them acceptable. Is it not Christ's intercession, based on the atonement, that purifies or sanctifies our prayers?<sup>22</sup>

John notices that once the prayers of the saints are incensed with the intercession of Christ they ascend. So the mixture of the heavenly and the earthly incense reaches the throne of God. So our prayers reach the throne of God. What a beautiful reminder that also today our prayers reach the very presence of God because they are accompanied by our heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 8:26-27). And God hears and responds. In Revelation 8 the angel takes the censor, now emptied of prayer, and fills it with fire from the altar and empties it upon the earth. Thunder, lightning, and earthquakes follow. The seven trumpets are blown (Rev. 8-9).

When one considers this scene in Revelation 8, one is comforted. In Christ, our incense offering, our prayer, is always a pleasing odor, a pleasing odor giving him rest and joy in his work of salvation as seen in us his children. In response, God works all things for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28), hurrying to the great day of Jesus Christ when the heavenly Holy of Holies will come on earth to be his dwelling place with man (Rev. 21:15-22). There the incense offering will be replaced by the sanctified praises of his people at rest in the joy of their Lord (cf. Rev. 5:6-14).

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<sup>22</sup>See, e.g., W. Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982; orig. published 1940), 117-118.