

THE ALTAR OF INCENSE IN HEBREWS 9:3-4

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An intriguing question to students of the letter to the Hebrews is why in Heb 9:3-4 the altar of incense (χρυσοῦν ἔχουσα θυμιατήριον) of the Hebrew sanctuary is placed in the "Most Holy Place" or "Holy of Holies" rather than in the "Holy Place," whose lampstand and table of showbread are mentioned in vs. 2. The Holy Place is the location assigned to the altar of incense of Exodus, which specifies that Moses should place it "before the veil that is by the ark of the testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the testimony, where I will meet with you" (Exod 30:6; cf. Exod 40:5 and Lev 16:18). This positioning of the altar of incense is further attested by the fact that incense was offered on it daily, whereas the Most Holy apartment of the sanctuary was entered only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, by the high priest alone (Exod 30:7-10 and Lev 16).¹

With respect to the situation that existed at the time when the Epistle to the Hebrews was written, Philip E. Hughes has aptly

¹As observed more than a century ago by Edward E. Atwater, erroneous conclusions about the location of the altar of incense have sometimes been drawn from Exod 40:5—"Thou [Moses] shalt set the altar of gold for the incense before the ark of the testimony." The misconception drawn from this text is that the incense altar indeed stood in the Holy of Holies; but as Atwater goes on to point out, although the altar was "before the ark," it was "also before and not behind the partition veil." *The History and Significance of the Sacred Tabernacle of the Hebrews* (New York, 1875), p. 41, n. 2.

In this connection, it may also be noted that certain ancient Canaanite temples had an inner space or shrine, with steps up from the outer room, and with an altar (presumably for burning incense) below the steps. Some post-Solomonic temple structures that are probably Israelite have come to light, as well. One such structure, found by Y. Aharoni in 'Arad in Judah and dating to ca. 9th-7th century B.C., has a raised *d'êbîr* with two incense altars before it. For summarized data concerning ancient temple finds of this sort, see Lawrence T. Geraty, "The Jerusalem Temple of the Hebrew Bible in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context," in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement*, ed. A. V. Wallenkampf and W. R. Leshner (Washington, D.C., 1981), pp. 51-55.

pointed out that the “proper position of so important an article as the altar of incense was hardly a subject of doubt or dispute.”² After noticing evidences from Philo of Alexandria and Josephus, both of whom located the incense altar in the “vestibule or antechamber” (i.e., in the Holy Place), Hughes goes on to suggest that it “is impossible to doubt that the disposition of the various furnishings of the Jewish shrine was perfectly familiar to the average Jew in the first century of our era.”³ The general arrangement of the furnishings of the original Israelite sanctuary had remained the same, of course, in Solomon’s temple, in the post-exilic temple, and in Herod’s reconstruction.⁴

1. *Suggested Solutions to the Altar Location* *Given in Hebrews 9:3-4*

We may now ask, what solutions have been proposed for the apparent discrepancy between Heb 9:3-4 and other biblical and historical data of the kind that we have noted above?⁵ Perhaps some of the earliest attempts to grapple with this problem are evidenced in the textual emendation represented in the fourth-century Codex Vaticanus, wherein the reference to the golden altar of incense is transferred from Heb 9:4 to 9:2, thus placing it with the objects described as belonging in the Holy Place. The best textual evidence is against this variation, which consequently must be viewed as merely a scribe’s attempt to correct the text.

Another solution reaching back to ancient times—and also represented throughout the Christian centuries—is that the term *θυμιατήριον* in 9:4 should be rendered as “censer” rather than “altar.”⁶ Jerome’s Vulgate took this direction in its use of the term

²Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977), p. 310.

³Ibid. The references to which Hughes calls attention in Philo are *Vita Mos.* ii.94f., 101-104; and *Quis Rev. Div. Her.* 226. The references he cites in Josephus are *Bell. Jud.* v.216ff.; and *Ant.* iii.139-147, 198.

⁴Cf. André Parrot, *The Temple of Jerusalem* (London, Eng., 1957), pp. 31, 33.

⁵Several of the following views, plus some others not noted here, have been called to attention by Hughes, pp. 309-313 and the footnotes on those pages.

⁶Hughes, p. 311, lists, e.g., Theophylact, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Grotius, Bengel, and Alford as holding this view.

turibulum ("censer") instead of *altare* ("altar"). The KJV also adopted the rendering "censer," as is true too even in the case of a few twentieth-century English Bible translations (such as those of Weymouth, Wuest, and the *Concordant Version*).

Indeed, "censer" is a legitimate alternative to "altar" as a translation of θυμιατήριον.⁷ But should it be so rendered in Heb 9:4? On the strength of similar "frequent earlier and contemporary enumerations of the holy vessels," R. H. Charles feels that θυμιατήριον in Heb 9:3-4 "should be taken . . . in its meaning of 'altar of incense,' and not in that of 'censer'."⁸ The majority of translators, commentators, and exegetes obviously have evidenced the same view.⁹

Some commentaries suggest that Heb 9:3-4 is simply in error concerning the location of the altar of incense.¹⁰ However, in contrast to this view, certain exegetes have suggested another (and in my opinion, more viable) solution: namely, that the statement in Heb 9:3-4 locates the altar on the basis of function rather than specific spatial position. W. S. Caldecott, for example, states:

On the western side of the outer hall stood a small golden table or altar. This was the altar of Incense, the sanctity of which surpassed that of the other articles of furniture around it. Its true

⁷Various commentators have, of course, taken note of this fact, for θυμιατήριον means a "vessel" for burning incense, and hence would properly be translated as either "censer" or "altar." In Heb 9:3-4, the context certainly seems to favor "altar." F. F. Bruce has stated the case well: "There was only one incense-altar, but there were several censers; and though it might be argued that the special reference here is to Aaron's censer, which he used on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:12; cf. Num. 16:46), this censer was scarcely distinctive enough to be mentioned separately; further, we are not told where it was kept, but since Aaron used it to carry fire into the holy of holies, to burn incense on it there, it is unlikely that it was kept in the holy of holies." *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1964), p. 185.

⁸R. H. Charles, ed. and trans., *The Apocalypse of Baruch* (London, Eng., 1896), p. 168.

⁹This preponderant view presumably is held mainly on contextual grounds; cf. n. 7, above.

¹⁰See, e.g., Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York, 1964), p. 145; and James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh, 1924), p. 114. Moffatt suggests that the "inaccuracy was rendered possible by the vague language of the pentateuch about the position of the altar of incense" in Exod 30:6, "where ἀπέναντι may mean 'opposite' or 'close in front of' the curtain—but on which side of it?"

position was within the Holy of Holies, and the writer of Hebrews gives it as one of the properties of that place (Heb. ix.3). It was by divine direction that it stood “before” (i.e., to the east of) the Veil, and “before” the Mercy-seat (Exod. xxx.6).

The reason for this departure from absolute correctness of position is that incense of sweet spices was to be burnt upon this altar every morning and every evening (Exod. xxx.7, 8) at the time of the offering of the daily burnt sacrifices. Had it stood in its proper place, within the second veil, the Holy of Holies would require to be entered twice daily, instead of once yearly. To guard the sanctity of the Most Holy place from too frequent intrusion by man, the incense-altar was placed “without the veil,” means being taken that the smoke of the incense . . . should find its way into the inner shrine, the more immediate dwelling place of Jehovah.¹¹

Hughes, in a similar vein, feels that “our author, so far from being guilty of ignorance of eccentricity, was, as Spicq judges, following a liturgical tradition which recognized a special doctrinal association between the altar of incense and the holy of holies.”¹²

At this juncture, it should be pointed out that the OT itself also mentions the altar of incense in close connection with the Holy of Holies. First, we may note two references in Exodus:

Exod 30:6: “And you shall put it before the veil that is by the ark of the testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the testimony, where I will meet with you.” (RSV)

Exod 40:5: “Moreover, you shall set the gold altar of incense before the ark of the testimony, and set up the veil for the doorway to the tabernacle.” (NASB)

In these two texts, specific orders are given regarding the location of the altar of incense within the sanctuary. It is most significant that the location of this altar is given, not in conjunction with the Holy Place or its furnishings, but rather in connection with the Holy of Holies and its articles. Moreover, as seen in the first text above, an *event reference* is also given for the altar of incense:

¹¹W. Shaw Caldecott, *Solomon's Temple* (Philadelphia, 1907), p. 277.

¹²Hughes, p. 312.

“before the mercy seat that is over the testimony, *where I will meet with you*” (emphasis supplied). This would seem to imply that the altar of incense is very closely related to the Most Holy Place and to the communication with God spoken of in connection with that inner room.

Another pertinent OT reference appears in 1 Kgs 6:19-22, in the description of the construction of Solomon’s temple:

¹⁹The inner sanctuary he prepared in the innermost part of the house to set there the ark of the covenant of the Lord. ²⁰The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high, and he overlaid it with pure gold. He also made an altar of cedar. ²¹And Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with pure gold, and he drew chains of gold across, in front of the inner sanctuary, and overlaid it with gold. ²²And he overlaid the whole house with gold, until all the house was finished. Also the whole altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary he overlaid with gold. (RSV)

Here both the ark of the covenant (vs. 19) and the altar of incense (vs. 20) are described in conjunction with the *d^ebîr*, the Most Holy Place; and indeed, that altar is also referred to as *belonging* to the inner sanctuary (vs. 22b).¹³

Perhaps the most significant reason why the altar of incense is placed in the Most Holy Place in Heb 9:3-4 is that the ministry of the incense of this altar was singularly on behalf of that inner shrine. The smoke of the incense of this altar found its way into the inner shrine, into the presence of Yahweh. In this vein, B. F. Westcott has suggested that the “Altar of incense bore the same relation to the Holy of Holies as the Altar of burnt offering to the Holy Place. It furnished in some sense the means of approach to it.”¹⁴ However, there is a further feature that deserves particular attention in this connection: namely, the fact that the very kind of incense burned upon this altar connected the altar even more closely to the Holy of Holies.

¹³Aside from the fact that the Hebrew of the MT so reads, it is interesting to note the similar thrust of the LXX reading: θυμιατήριον κατὰ πρόσωπον τοῦ θαβουρ, “in the presence [or, ‘in the face’] of the shrine [i.e., Holy of Holies].”

¹⁴B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London, Eng., 1889; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1955), p. 247.

2. "Inner" Incense and the Altar of Incense
in Hebrews 9:3-4

Menahem Haran has given a detailed description of the kind of incense burned upon this golden altar of incense.¹⁵ It was a special, "inner," incense—distinguished in both its use and composition from the ordinary, "outer," incense. It was burned only in the interior of the sanctuary/temple, whereas the "outer" incense was used in censers in the courtyard ritual. In fact, only once a year was this "inner" incense burned in a censer; namely, on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest carried it into the Most Holy Place. As Haran has stated, this incense was indeed "a special kind of incense set apart for the interior of the temple, and for there alone."¹⁶

As to its composition, in which it differed from the common incense, Haran has provided the following explanation.

The difference is one of ingredients. The incense of the court is always mentioned without any additional epithet, whereas that of the tabernacle is punctiliously referred to as "the incense of *sammîm*." It is so called because, in addition to frankincense, it has three other ingredients, which are the *sammîm*, "spices" (Exod. 30:34-8)—something that is not usual in ordinary incense. Moreover, because of the special ritual character of this "inner" incense, it is stated that the frankincense added to it must be "pure" (*ibid.*, v. 34)—a requirement which is not mentioned in the case of the frankincense added to the ordinary grain-offerings.¹⁷

With respect to the matter of composition in relationship to ritual use, Haran states further:

As indicated in the prescription, this incense has two main ingredients. The first are *sammîm*, which perhaps are not exactly spices, but substances of another kind (as some commentators have remarked) which serve to improve the mixture of spices when added to it. Three kinds of *sammîm* are mentioned here:

¹⁵Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, Eng., 1978), pp. 208, 241-243.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 241.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 208.

nāṭāp, *šēḥēlet*, and *ḥelbēnāh*. The second ingredient is pure frankincense, *l'ḥônāh*, the same spice which was added to the memorial-portions of the grain-offerings. It is only in connection with this incense and with the shewbread, both of which belong inside the tabernacle, that the priestly regulations emphasize that the frankincense must be "pure," *zakkāh*.¹⁸

The inclusion of such large quantities of *sammîm* in incense was, at any rate, something exceptional. That is why this incense is associated with them and designated by the conjoint form *q'ṭōret hassammîn*, "the incense of *sammîm*," to distinguish it from the censer-incense which is called simply *q'ṭōret*, without any appellation, that is, ordinary incense. The fact is that in virtually every reference to the "inner" incense it is punctiliously described as "the incense of *sammîm*." Just as the incense of *sammîm* must not be put outside the tabernacle . . . , so "strange incense," *q'ṭōret zārāh*, may not be offered on the altar of gold. . . . In one place the altar of gold is actually given the full epithet of "the altar of the incense of *sammîm*" (Lev. 4:7).¹⁹

Of great significance to our study is the fact that the only incense the high priest carried with him into the *d'ebîr* during the Day of Atonement was *sammîm* incense—the exclusive incense of the golden incense altar. The cloud rising from it would cover the mercy seat, whereupon was manifested the presence of Yahweh; and thus the high priest would be shielded from God's presence and not die (Lev 16:12-13). Accordingly, *sammîm* incense served, then, not only as "inner" incense of the sanctuary, but as verily "innermost" incense by reaching the very presence of God.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the ritualistic importance and theological significance of the altar of incense in the sanctuary of ancient Israel were derived, not merely from its location in the Holy Place, but also—and perhaps more importantly—from the ministry of its incense in the Most Holy Place. Thus, the description in Heb 9:3-4, rather

¹⁸Ibid., p. 242.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 243.

than showing ignorance of the Hebrew ritual, would appear to indicate familiarity and knowledge of that ritual's most minute particulars and subtle meanings. That is to say, these seemingly problematical verses do not reveal either a textual corruption or any inconsistency or error on the part of an uninformed author, but suggest instead a precise theological interpretation of the function of the altar of incense in the sanctuary services.

This fact becomes even clearer when one remembers the context of the passage in question. The concern there is a spiritual and theological one, expressing the divine reality of Christ's work as High Priest in "the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands" (Heb 9:11). Therefore, it is understandable that even when the earthly sanctuary is described in 9:3-4, the emphasis is more in terms of deeper theological meanings, functions, and relationships than on merely the formal structural arrangements. In short, when the Holy of Holies is described in that passage, the golden altar of incense is mentioned because of the sacral, ritualistic, and intercessory significance of the special incense ascending into the presence of Yahweh enthroned upon His mercy seat.²⁰

²⁰In this connection, it is interesting to compare another NT reference to the altar of incense—Rev 8:3-4. In this apocalyptic vision, precisely the theological concept we have just noticed is illustrated: As the angel offers "much incense" on that altar "before the throne," the smoke of the incense mingles with the prayers of the saints in going "up before God."