

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 21

Chapters 30

The Altar of Incense

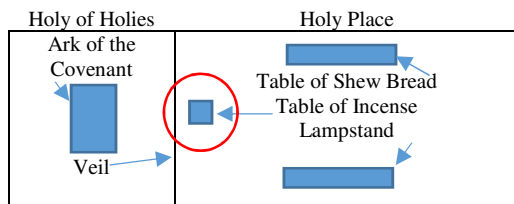
Exodus 30:1 "Moreover, you shall make an altar as a place for burning incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. ² "Its length *shall be* a cubit, and its width a cubit, it shall be square, and its height *shall be* two cubits; its horns *shall be* of one piece with it. ³ "And you shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and its sides all around, and its horns; and you shall make a gold molding all around for it. ⁴ "And you shall make two gold rings for it under its molding; you shall make *them* on its two side walls-- on opposite sides-- and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. ⁵ "And you shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. ⁶ "And you shall put this altar in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over *the ark of the testimony*, where I will meet with you. ⁷ "And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; he shall burn it every morning when he trims the lamps.



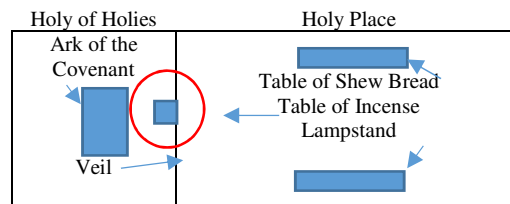
Altar of Incense

This small table was 21 inches square and 42 inches high. In most pictures, as with the example, the table is enclosed all the way down to the ground. However, it is quite possible that the table was not solid all the way to the ground but simply had four legs. It was made of acacia (gum-arabic) wood covered with gold. We do not know what the gold molding around the top looked like but it is safe to say that it matched the molding on the Table of Shew Bread. The gold rings for the poles would also match those on the Table of Shew Bread and the Ark of the Covenant.

The placement of the Altar of Incense in the Tabernacle is debated because of the wording, "And you shall put this altar in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over *the ark of the testimony*." Below are two examples representing the debate. Notice the place of the Table of Incense in relation to the Veil.



Example 1: The Table of Incense is located next to the veil in the Holy Place.



Example 2: The Table of Incense is located next to the veil in the Holy of Holies.

This debate stems from a subjective interpretation of the wording “**in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat.**” First, the Mercy Seat rests on top of the Ark of the Covenant (Testimony). Second, the Ark rests in the Holy of Holies with the Veil to the front. In the Hebrew language, the word for “front” means *to the east*. The Tabernacle entrance always faced the east. Therefore, the Table of Incense was in front, to the east, of the Veil which was in front, to the east, of the Ark of the Covenant, placing the Table of Incense in the Holy Place, not in the Holy of Holies. This confusion is complicated by the fact that an error may have occurred in the Hebrew copies. Changing the order of three letters in the Hebrew word for Veil changes the word to Mercy Seat.

Here is the Hebrew copy error: (compare the Hebrew letters)

Pa-poketh (הַפָּכֶת) = Veil

Ka-poreth (הַכֹּפֶרֶת) = Mercy Seat

If the copies do, in fact, have a copy error, the text should say, “**And you shall put this altar in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the veil that is next to the ark of the testimony.**” The Hebrew word *al* which is translated *over* in the passage is just as often translated *next to* in the English translations. In other words, there may not only be a copy error in the Hebrew but also a translation error into English. If a copy error exists, the last “in front of the veil” is a repetition of the first for emphasis as regularly seen in Hebrew Scriptures.

This passage is further complicated by a reference to this Exodus text made in the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews 9:¹ Now even the first *covenant* had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary. ² For there was a tabernacle prepared, the outer one, in which *were* the lampstand and the table and the sacred bread; this is called the holy place. ³ And behind the second veil, there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, ⁴ having a golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron's rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant. ⁵ And above it *were* the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

The second Veil divided the Tabernacle into two parts, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. The first Veil, which is not addressed by the author of the book of Hebrews is a reference to the screen (or Veil/curtain) at the entrance of the Tabernacle.

The Hebrews 9 passage clearly states in the English translation that the Altar of Incense was with the Ark of the Covenant behind the Veil. In this passage, we have a contextual problem caused by the separation of the text by a chapter break. In the previous verses, the author is discussing how the LORD Jesus has made a new covenant for atonement that made the first covenant obsolete. Chapter 9 picks up the topic by talking about the first covenant for atonement in which the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies one day a year



Golden Censer
The original censer probably had a handle rather than a chain.

to atone for the sins of the people. In that ceremony, the priest would take the Golden Censer off the Table of Incense and carry it behind the Veil into the Holy of Holies. The Table of Incense would remain in place in the Holy Place (the front part of the Tabernacle where the priest performed his daily duties). The Table of Incense was the regular resting place of the Golden Censer. The Golden Censer would be filled with hot coals. Incense would be added creating a soothing aroma and smoke. For people who have a Catholic background, these types of censers are used regularly in worship ceremonies.

When Hebrews 9:4 says **“having a golden altar of incense,”** contains a translation error. The Greek word is *thumia-terion*. *Thumia* means *censer* not “altar” as translated here. The ending of the Greek word is *terion* and it denotes the *place of use*. Here, the King James Version is the most accurate when it says, “Which had the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant.”

The Golden Censer was used daily by the priests in the front part of the Tabernacle called the Holy Place, but once a year the High Priest would take it into the back part of the Tabernacle called the Holy of Holies for the yearly atonement (satisfaction) for the sins of the nation of Israel.

The Table of Incense in the Tabernacle would have been placed as illustrated in example 1, east of the Veil which was east of the Ark of the Covenant. The Table of Incense was used to hold the Golden Censer when not in use by the priest.

The story in Hebrews 9 continues to explain the ceremony as follows.

Hebrews 9:⁶ Now when these things have been so prepared, the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle performing the divine worship, ⁷ but into the second, only the high priest *enters* once a year, not without *taking* blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance.

So, the context of Hebrew 9 shows the change of the atonement for sins from the earthly Tabernacle to the heavenly Tabernacle found in the LORD Jesus. The earthly Tabernacle was done away with when the heavenly Tabernacle was introduced. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would carry the Golden Censer, not the Altar of Incense, into the Holy of Holies where he would use it to offer up the sins of the nations for cleansing.

In returning to the Exodus passage that says, **“And you shall put this altar in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over *the ark of the testimony*,”** we find that it is correct even if a copy error exists. The Altar of Incense was placed “in front of the veil” which was “in front of the mercy seat” that rested on the “Ark of the Testimony” (Covenant). The Golden Censer would then be fueled on the Table of Incense and carried around the Holy Place by the priest in the operation of the daily routine. Once a year, the High Priest would remove the Golden Censer from the Altar of Incense and take it into the Holy of Holies (also sometimes called the *Most Holy Place*).

The Trimming of the Lamps

Exodus 30:8 **“And when Aaron trims the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense. *There shall be* perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations.**

After the sun set each day, but before darkness overtook the skies, Aaron, or one of his sons performing the duties in his stead, would trim the wicks of the seven lamps and refuel their reservoirs. He would also load more hot coals in the Golden Censer and add the allotted incense to burn through the night.

The Warning Against Strange Incense and Offerings

Exodus 30:9 "You shall not offer any strange incense on this altar, or burnt offering or meal offering; and you shall not pour out a libation on it.

What, pray tell, could be a strange incense or offering “on this altar?” In Leviticus 16, the High Priest is charged with making atonement for the Altar of Incense once a year on the Day of Atonement by sprinkling blood on the horns of the altar. But what is a strange incense, a strange burnt offering, a strange meal offering or a strange libation (wine or oil) poured out on the Altar of Incense? The answer is simple! The LORD is going to give the recipe for making the incense that can be used on the altar. It is the only kind of incense that can legally be used on the altar without punishment from LORD. A strange incense would therefore be any incense not made exactly according to the recipe given by the LORD. Furthermore, the incense was stored on the Altar of Incense (the table) along with the Golden Censer; the table was not ever to be used for any other type of offering (burnt, meal or wine). Any other types of offerings on the table were strictly forbidden; those kinds of offerings were to be performed outside the Tabernacle at the Brazen Altar.

The Atonement Once a Year

Exodus 30:10 "And Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year; he shall make atonement on it with the blood of the sin offering of atonement once a year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD."

Herein, Moses addresses the yearly cleansing of the Altar of Incense by placing blood on the horns once each year.

The Census and Ransom for the Sons of Israel

Exodus 30:11 The LORD also spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² "When you take a census of the sons of Israel to number them, then each one of them shall give a ransom for himself to the LORD, when you number them, that there may be no plague among them when you number them. ¹³ "This is what everyone who is numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as a contribution to the LORD. ¹⁴ "Everyone who is numbered, from twenty years old and over, shall give the contribution to the LORD.

To further aid in the collection of the needed items to build the Tabernacle and its furnishings, a census of all the males twenty years old and older was to be taken and a ransom for their lives was to be paid to the LORD. Initially, the census was for construction goods. In the following years, the census was conducted to raise money for the work of the priests and the routine of the Tabernacle. The ransom was “half a shekel” per person. We hesitate to state what that value

would be in today's money for this reason. In the world, there were shekels of gold ([1Ch 21:25](#)), of silver ([1Sa 9:8](#)), of brass ([1Sa 17:5](#)), and of iron ([1Sa 17:7](#)).²⁹ A shekel was approximately 224 grains or 9.3 troy ounces. Therefore, the ransom for each male was half a shekel or about 4.65 troy ounces. On October 17, 2017, the asking price for one troy ounce of gold was \$1,286.90 which in today's money would mean that the ransom for each male would equal \$5,984.08. If the same ransom was paid in silver, the offering would be worth \$79 today. We must note at this point that gold, silver, brass and iron were of little value in the days of the exodus and the price did not matter. The half shekel was a weight, not a value. Whether or not they brought a half shekel of gold, silver or brass did not matter because all those metals were needed to build the Tabernacle and its furnishings.

An interesting question arises at this point, "How did the people know the weight of a sanctuary shekel?" These people had just spent 430 years in Egypt; they had no sanctuary there. They had no sanctuary before Joseph moved his father and siblings to Egypt. No sanctuary is mentioned in the book of Genesis. How can they possibly know about a sanctuary shekel? Once it is built, the Tabernacle will be the sanctuary of the Israelites until Solomon builds the Temple. To add to the confusion, not one Hebrew gold sanctuary shekel has ever been found! Only silver! Therefore, the gold that was brought as the offering must have been measured by weight, not value.

The Ransom Same for All

Exodus 30:15 "The rich shall not pay more, and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to the LORD to make atonement for yourselves."

In the LORD's eyes, there was to be no difference between the rich and poor, the price was the same for all. Why? It was because the cost of redemption and cleansing was the same for the rich and the poor – no difference!

The Purpose of the Ransom

Exodus 30:16 "And you shall take the atonement money from the sons of Israel, and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the LORD, to make atonement for yourselves."

Obviously, the collection of the ransoms was an operation of the Tabernacle but it was also for a **"memorial for the sons of Israel before the LORD."** In the Scripture, a memorial is a permanent record. In this case, the ransom was a permanent record that each male had been atoned for in the eyes of the LORD. Our question at this point, for which we do not know the answers is "Were this census and ransom required every year on the Day of Atonement?" Yes, most likely! Another question arises at this point because the LORD is telling Moses what to do when he returns to the camp. Moses' first instruction was to take an offering which included gold, silver and bronze (copper) for the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings.

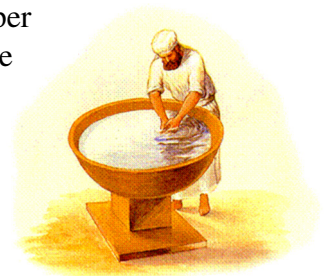
²⁹ *Shekel*, Illustrated Bible Dictionary: And Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature.

(Exodus 25) Was this ransom for the souls of each male age twenty and older the required offering of gold, silver and bronze? Most likely!

The Laver of Bronze

Exodus 30:17 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁸ "You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base of bronze, for washing; and you shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it. ¹⁹ "And Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet from it; ²⁰ when they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water, that they may not die; or when they approach the altar to minister, by offering up in smoke a fire *sacrifice* to the LORD. ²¹ "So they shall wash their hands and their feet, that they may not die; and it shall be a perpetual statute for them, for Aaron and his descendants throughout their generations."

The LORD instructed Moses concerning the Bronze Laver or large copper basin that was to be used to hold water for the ceremonial washings. We do not know the size of this basin. It was placed between the front Veil (screen or door) of the Tabernacle and the Brazen Altar of Sacrifice. Moses will use water from this basin to wash Aaron and his sons for their ordination service. In the regular work of the priests, they will wash their hands and feet with water from this basin before they enter the Tabernacle or before they approach the Brazen Altar with a sacrifice. The ritual washing was a permanent requirement for every part of every ceremonial duty of the priest. The priests performed their services with bare feet. Shoes or sandals were never approved by the LORD. Neither dirty feet nor dirty hands were allowed in the Tabernacle or in the sacrificial system. Clean hands and feet symbolized the requirement of the holiness of their work.



Laver of Bronze

The Finest of Spices

Exodus 30:22 Moreover, the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ "Take also for yourself the finest of spices: of flowing myrrh five hundred *shekels*, and of fragrant cinnamon half as much, two hundred and fifty, and of fragrant cane two hundred and fifty, ²⁴ and of cassia five hundred, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and of olive oil a hin.



Shekel of the Sanctuary



Quarter Shekel

In the collection process for donations for the Tabernacle and its furnishings, Moses was to gather myrrh, cinnamon, cane, cassia and olive oil. It is interesting that the myrrh, cinnamon, cane and cassia were to be collected according to the weight of the “**shekel of the sanctuary.**” The pencil sketch to the right was made from a late silver Sanctuary Shekel. The shekels of Moses’ day would have been struck with a mallet on both sides and would not have a perfect shape but would resemble the sketch of the quarter shekel shown to the right.

As stated previously, a shekel would weigh approximately 9.3 troy ounces today. With that knowledge, Moses was to collect 4,650 pounds of myrrh and 2,325 pounds of cinnamon, cane and cassia. A “hin” of olive oil was equal to about eight quarts.

“**Flowing myrrh**” was the liquid resin collected by crushing the limbs of the *Commiphora* tree. It is a thorny tree as seen in the example.

We are familiar with “**cinnamon**.” It comes from the inner bark from several species of trees.

“**Cane**” is also called *sweet calamus*, known today as sweet sugar cane. When its leaves are crushed, the resin has a sweet aroma.

“**Cassia**” is a cousin to the *cinnamon* tree. It is a dark brown spice created by crushing the bark of the tree. It is interesting that most commercial cinnamon purchased in most countries today is a mixture of true cinnamon and cassia. Cinnamon is warm in tone and has a sweet flavor. Cassia is reddish brown, coarse in texture and slightly bitter in taste. Although in the same family, the two smells are completely different.



Commiphora Tree
from which Myrrh is
collected.

The Anointing of the Furniture and Fixtures

Exodus 30:25 "And you shall make of these a holy anointing oil, a perfume mixture, the work of a perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil. ²⁶ "And with it you shall anoint the tent of meeting and the ark of the testimony, ²⁷ and the table and all its utensils, and the lampstand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, ²⁸ and the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the laver and its stand. ²⁹ "You shall also consecrate them, that they may be most holy; whatever touches them shall be holy. ³⁰ " And you shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may minister as priests to Me.

The LORD instructed Moses to have a perfumer make the holy anointing oil from the myrrh, cinnamon, cane, cassia and olive oil. The specific recipe was not given; however, we can assume that the recipe for the holy anointing oil was the combination of all the ingredients collected. Surely the 4,650 pounds of liquid myrrh was mixed with 8 quarts of oil. Then the cinnamon, cane resin and cassia were dissolved in the myrrh and oil. The completed product would yield enough holy anointing oil to coat all the furnishings of the Tabernacle as well as Aaron and his four sons.

The Warning About Misuse of the Anointing Oil

Exodus 30:31 "And you shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'This shall be a holy anointing oil to Me throughout your generations. ³² 'It shall not be poured on anyone's body, nor shall you make *any* like it, in the same proportions; it is holy, *and* it shall be holy to you. ³³ ' Whoever shall mix *any* like it, or whoever puts any of it on a layman, shall be cut off from his people.'"

The recipe for the holy anointing oil was never to be changed nor was it to be created by Israel for any purpose other than use in the Tabernacle. The recipe may have been widely known in order that no Israelite would accidentally create the same mixture of oil for any other purposes.

This oil was for holy purposes only; the people who were not descendants of Aaron ordained as priests should never mix or be anointed with the oil. The punishment for disobeying this rule was excommunication from the nation of Israel.

The Spices of Equal Parts for Incense

Exodus 30:34 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Take for yourself spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, spices with pure frankincense; there shall be an equal part of each. ³⁵ "And with it you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer, salted, pure, *and* holy. ³⁶ "And you shall beat some of it very fine, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting, where I shall meet with you; it shall be most holy to you. ³⁷ "And the incense which you shall make, you shall not make in the same proportions for yourselves; it shall be holy to you for the LORD. ³⁸ "Whoever shall make *any* like it, to use as perfume, shall be cut off from his people."

The incense was made from totally different spices from those used in the anointing oil. Equal parts of stacte, onycha, galbanum and frankincense were used, ground into a fine powder mixture with salt.

“Stacte” is the gum that naturally oozes from the myrrh tree. While still myrrh, it is different from the liquid myrrh used in the anointing oil. The gum would dry hard and could be ground to a fine powder.

“Onycha” is the membrane of a mollusk found in the Red Sea. It would dry hard and could be ground to a fine powder.

“Galbanum” is the resin from the African fenula which grows as tall as ten feet in stalks. When broken, a thin cream-colored milk can be collected. It would dry hard and could be ground to a fine powder.

“Frankincense” is the resin that is bled from the Boswellia family of trees, all of which produce pure frankincense. The resin would dry hard and could be ground to a fine powder.

Equal parts of the four spices were mixed together and most likely an equal part of salt was added. The perfumers of the Israelites would create this mixture one time a year, one pound for each day of the year, 354 pounds as well as three pounds to be used on the Day of Atonement. As the days passed, the whole mixture would begin to solidify. Each day, the priest would beat a pound of incense off the lump and pulverize it into a fine powder. Once placed in the Golden Censer, its aroma was sweet before the LORD. As with the holy anointing oil, the recipe for this incense was not to be copied for private use in any form. For now, this incense is for Moses' use specifically but it will be used by the priests, too. While it smolders in the Golden Censer on the Altar of Incense, the LORD promises to meet and speak with Moses. All of that will change when Moses dies after the death of Aaron. Then, the LORD will speak to his priests through the Breastplate of Judgment and the Urim and Thumin.