

Exodus 30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 30. You shall make an altar on which to burn incense. You shall make it of acacia wood. 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. You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and around its sides and its horns. And you shall make a moulding of gold around it.

And you shall make two golden rings for it. Under its moulding on two opposite sides you shall 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 in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the testimony, where I will meet with you. 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 at twilight he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the Lord throughout your generations. You shall not offer an authorised incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering. And you shall not pour a drink offering on it. Aaron shall make atonement on 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. The Lord said to Moses,

When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the Lord when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this, half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary.

The shekel is twenty geras. Half a shekel as an offering to the Lord. Everyone who is numbered in the census from twenty years old and upward shall give the Lord's offering. The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than the half shekel when you give the Lord's offering to make atonement for your lives. You shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the Lord, so as to make atonement for your lives.

The Lord said to Moses, You shall also make a basin of bronze with its stand of bronze for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his son shall wash their hands and their feet. When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the Lord, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations.

The Lord said to Moses, Take the finest spices of liquid myrrh, five hundred shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon, half as much, that is two hundred and fifty, and two hundred and fifty of aromatic cane, and five hundred of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hin of olive oil. And you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer. It shall be a holy anointing oil. With it you shall anoint the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the table and all its utensils, and the lampstand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand. You shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy. Whatever touches them will become holy. You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests. And you shall say to the people of Israel, This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on the body of an ordinary person, and you shall make no other like it in composition. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it, or whoever puts any of it on an outsider, shall be cut off from his people. The Lord said to Moses, Take sweet spices, stacti, and onnaker, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense. Of each shall there be an equal part. And make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy. You shall beat some of it

very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting, where I shall meet with you. It shall be most holy for you. And the incense that you shall make according to its composition, you shall not make for yourselves. It shall be for you holy to the Lord.

[4 : 42] Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume, shall be cut off from his people. Exodus chapter 30 contains five sections, concerned with the incense altar, the mustering money, the bronze labour, the anointing oil, and the ingredients of the incense. You could maybe recognise it starting off with a gold item, then with a collection of silver, then a bronze item, then an oil, and then a special incense.

These are materials that correspond with the gathering of materials at the very beginning in chapter 25, when the tabernacle is first presented to us. The incense altar establishes a continual ascent to God, and I think this continues the theme of Sabbath that is present at the end of chapter 29. The tabernacle is like an ascending ladder to God's presence, and the fact that the altar of incense is placed just before the veil in front of God's throne suggests it is representing some sort of ascent. You could maybe connect it with a sort of Jacob's ladder. This is the way that you go up into God's presence, and it also represents prayer. I think we see that in places such as Psalm 141 verse 2, let my prayer be counted as incense before you. See similar themes in Revelation chapter 5 verse 8 and 8 verses 3 to 4. Maybe it can also be connected with the pillar of cloud and fire.

This altar is gold, again, like other elements of the holy place and the most holy place, and it's square, like the most holy place. It's a fifth of the length and the width of the bronze altar. It also has horns, and it corresponds with the bronze altar in various ways. We noted in the ordination rite for the priests that in the ordination rite, the blood is placed upon the horns of the bronze altar, but it seems on other occasions the purification blood is placed on the horns of the gold altar. So there seems to be some correspondence between them. Incense creates a pleasing environment.

Some have suggested that it covers up the smell of flesh and blood, the butchery that is characteristic of the tabernacle. I don't think that's necessarily the case. The smell of the meat burning would be a pleasant smell for the most part, and the scent of the incense, I think, is doing something else.

[7 : 02] We can think of the connection between incense and perfumed realms of love. That's often where we find the language of incense, in places like Song of Songs and elsewhere. And God's palace at the heart of Israel is where the bridegroom meets his bride. One could maybe see it as a sort of wedding chamber.

One of the natural consequences of this incense would be that there would be a glorious perfumed cloud that marked out the tabernacle, and it would connect with the glory cloud of God's own presence.

It would also give priests and worshippers a sense of going up into the clouds. And it would also leave a mark upon people. Everyone who had been in that realm would smell of that realm. They would carry that scent with them wherever they went. Once again, we have the expression here, throughout your generations, which is that catchphrase for the second stage of the creation work that we have in this seven-day pattern. It's the filling stage. And here it, I think, ends that particular pattern. The full purpose of the burning of incense can be discussed on a number of fronts. One area that might give us some insight is the stories of places like Numbers chapter 16 verses 44 to 50, where it seems to serve as a propitiatory act in Korah's rebellion. The offering of incense is something that brings a sweet-smelling aroma to the Lord, and it appeases him. And there, I think, it represents the true worship of Israel, and it appeases God concerning the rebellion of the false worshippers, the false priests.

So now we've had the gold item, and we move on to the gathering of silver. The gathering of silver in the census tax is something that has puzzled many people, the exact meaning of it. There seems to be some danger in numbering the people. If you number the people, you're inviting judgment upon yourself.

And we see a story concerning that in 2 Samuel chapter 24 and 1 Chronicles chapter 21. Both of them tell this same story of David numbering the people and being judged for it severely. There even Joab has a sense that this is a wrong thing to do, that this is a dangerous thing to do. Maybe it's assuming God's prerogative, that God is the only one who can truly number his people. To number the people is a claim to control them, a claim to have mastery over them. And to do that is to court God's displeasure.

[9 : 33] Now here, God seems to allow for the possibility of censuses being taken. But yet, he requires that a poll tax be taken whenever that happens, the same amount for each person, and that it be given to the tabernacle. Now some of this money seems to have been used to construct the tabernacle.

In chapter 38, verses 25 following, The hundred talents of silver were for casting the bases of the sanctuary and the bases of the veil, a hundred bases for the hundred talents, a talent a base. And of the 1,775 shekels, he made hooks for the pillars and overlaid their capitals and made fillets for them.

Now this doesn't seem to be an annual census, but it does seem to be recurring, or at least allow for the possibility of a census occurring on other occasions. But it is discouraged by the fact that it would be unpopular when you're taking a poll tax of the people. It would be a disincentive to numbering the people. The people belong to God, and you need to be very aware of numbering them for your own purposes. And so God gives a conditional law here. If you are going to take a census, you're going to have to take this poll tax too. And that poll tax is going to be unpopular, so it's a discouragement from taking a census, unless there's a very, very good reason to do so. There are some chronological questions in the relationship between this and the census at the beginning of numbers. But it seems that the tax was taken, and then the census numbers were still being crunched, as it were. And that was given in the second month, whereas the first month was when the tax was actually received. The labour comes next. We've had gold, silver, and now bronze.

Water is connected with ritual purity. And once again, there's some natural symbolism here. Water has a very natural connection with purity. It's what we use to wash and cleanse ourselves. And washing hands and feet before serving was necessary if you were going into the holy place.

[11 : 53] You are operating on holy ground. And it seems likely that the priests were working with bare feet. Just as Moses had to go towards God's presence, removing his sandals because he was stepping on holy ground, so the Israelite priests have to remove their shoes, their sandals, as they come into the Lord's presence. The labour is made of bronze and belongs to a realm of lesser glory. It's not actually used for worship. It prepares for worship, but it's not actually an element of worship itself.

Hands and feet are those parts of us that come most in contact with the world and must be cleansed first. They're the things that we use to do things, to walk and to act. Perhaps they're also connected with themes of procreational life. In chapter 38, verse 8, we see that the bronze basin and its stand of bronze were made from the mirrors of the ministering women who ministered in the entrance of the tent of meeting. It seems to have some gendered connection for that reason. And I wonder whether we're supposed to connect it with procreation for that reason. Perhaps the connection between springs and wells and women should be brought to mind here. The final sections of this chapter concern the anointing oil and the incense. And both of these involve a special recipe that is holy to the Lord and not for common use. And under no circumstances should it be made for regular use. In both cases, this would have the effect of having a smell or scent or product that is deeply evocative of the realm of the tabernacle.

Whenever people smelt it, they would know that it belonged to the tabernacle, that something had been in that realm. It was a unique smell so that the scent would evoke only one particular place. And those who spent time there would take that smell with them. Such a substance, I believe, should be connected in certain ways with the spirit. A question to consider. How can reflecting upon the incense and its place within the worship of Israel help us to understand certain dimensions of our own worship as Christians?

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